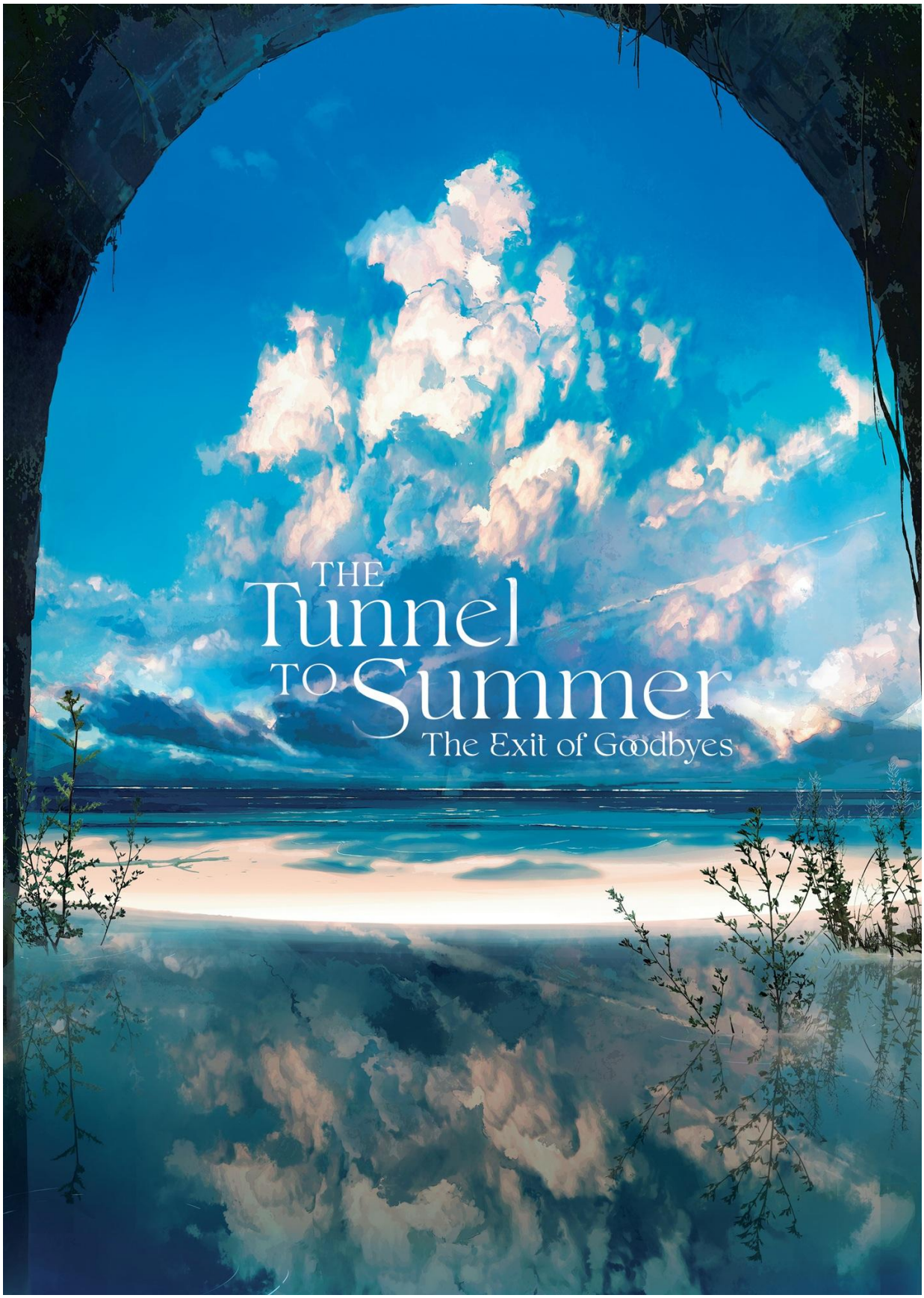
By Mei Hachimoku
Illustrations by KUKKA
THE
Tunnel
TO
Summer
The Exit of Goodbyes

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Table of Contents Page
Copyrights and Credits
Title Page
Chapter 1: Monochrome Skies
Chapter 2: Sweat and Hair Conditioner
Chapter 3: When the Rain Lets Up
Chapter 4: Her Dream, His Reality
Chapter 5: Run
Final Chapter
Afterword
Creator Profiles
Newsletter

OceanofPDF.com


THE
Tunnel
TO Summer
The Exit of Goodbyes

OceanofPDF.com

Kaoru Tono
Koharu Kawasaki
Karen Tono
Shohei Kaga
Anzu Hanashiro

OceanofPDF.com

"Do you have a crush on Kawasaki?"
"Where's this coming from?"
"Well, you just seem awfully concerned about her."
"Oh. Yeah, uh... I think I know why that might be."
"Do tell."
"Because she kinda reminds me of my little sister, in a way."

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
Monochrome Skies

CHAPTER TWO
Sweat and Hair Conditioner

CHAPTER THREE
When the Rain Lets Up

CHAPTER FOUR
Her Dream, His Reality

CHAPTER FIVE
Run

Final Chapter

OceanofPDF.com

NATSU ENO TUNNEL, SAYONARA NO DEGUCHI
by Mei HACHIMOKU
Illustration by KUKKA
© 2019 Mei HACHIMOKU
All rights reserved.
Original Japanese edition published by SHOGAKUKAN.

English translation rights in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand arranged with SHOGAKUKAN through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Evan Ward
ORIGINAL DESIGN: tanigomekabuto(musicagographics)
COVER DESIGN: H. Qi
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-415-5
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

OceanofPDF.com

THE Tunnel TO Summer
The Exit of Goodbyes

WRITTEN BY
Mei Hachimoku

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
KUKKA

TRANSLATED BY
Evan Ward

Seven Seas Entertainment

CHARACTERS

KAORU TONO
The protagonist. A high school sophomore in a secluded seaside town.

ANZU HANASHIRO
A mysterious girl who just transferred in from Tokyo.

SHOHEI KAGA
Kaoru's best friend.

KOHARU KAWASAKI
A girl in Kaoru's class who loves bossing him around.

KAREN TONO
Kaoru's younger sister. Passed away five years ago.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Monochrome Skies

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 1:
Monochrome Skies

MAN, I hate summer.

Such were my thoughts as I sat broiling on the concrete platform, praying my train would soon arrive to grant me a brief reprieve from the midmorning swelter. It was only the beginning of July, and already it felt like stepping into a sauna every time I walked out the front door. The blistering heat and humidity would have been miserable enough on their own, but add to that the endless laughter of cicadas, and it was enough to make my morning commute feel like a sick form of torture. Just when I thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, a muffled announcement rang out over the station's lone loudspeaker.

"Erm, attention, all passengers. We regret to announce that we're experiencing a significant delay due to an unexpected collision with a deer farther down the line. We deeply apologize for the inconvenience, as we know your time is valuable, but ask that you please bear with us as we address the situation…"

The rusty old loudspeaker choked out a crackle of static from its perch atop a nearby utility pole as the announcement cut off. *Ugh. Not again,* I groaned. The same thing had happened last month, albeit with a wild boar instead of a deer.

Only a single set of tracks ran through the ramshackle station, which looked directly out over the open ocean. All that lay on the inland side of the platform were dense woodlands and a steep upward incline. As it was one of the few truly remote stations left in the prefecture that had yet to be remodeled, it had become a somewhat popular destination for explorers looking to venture off the beaten path. Unfortunately, the rail line's dilapidated state also meant that these kinds of delays were relatively frequent. Not that I generally minded being late for school—any other time of year, I would have welcomed the free tardy slip—but right now, I would have vastly preferred to sit in an air-conditioned classroom than languish

beneath the hot sun for God knew how much longer. Delays due to wildlife could last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, though the announcer's use of the word "significant" led me to believe I was going to be stuck for at least another thirty minutes, based on prior experience.

"Great. Guess I'm getting cooked alive…" I grumbled as I hung my head in resignation, the harsh sunbeams beating down mercilessly on the back of my neck. I lifted the sleeve of my button-down and wiped a trickle of sweat from my temple before it could get into my eye. You'd think it wouldn't be too hard for them to install a covered waiting area with an AC unit, but then again, this station didn't even have automated turnstiles, so perhaps that was too great a luxury. All I could do was hobble over to one of two small benches under the rickety wooden shelter to try to get some relief from the heat. One of the two was already occupied by a couple of girls from my high school, chattering blithely as though the scorching weather didn't bother them in the slightest.

"*Hell* yes! Looks like we might get out of first period gym class after all!"

"Aww, but that poor deer, though…"

"Hey, survival of the fittest, right?"

It was like this every morning. These two never seemed to be on quite the same wavelength—but judging from their perpetual giggling, this apparently didn't bother them all that much. I took the empty seat opposite them and scooted as far down the bench as I could so as not to make them feel like I was intruding on their conversation. The shade did sadly little to cool me off, so I undid the top button of my shirt and flapped the collar a few times to give myself some air as I leaned against the backrest. Then, as if in answer to my prayers, a pleasant coastal breeze blew by, filling my nostrils with the pungent smell of sea salt.

Just across the tracks, the land gradually sloped down before dropping off into the sea. Over the edge of the cliff, the light blue sky turned paler and paler as it approached the hazy horizon, while in turn, the sea grew a deeper, fuller shade of cerulean. The ocean waves shimmered softly in the sunlight. There was something almost inherently therapeutic

about looking out over the ocean in the early morning—similar to watching the fragile flicker of candlelight or the cascading course of a babbling brook. It was one of those things that you could look at for hours and never grow tired of, soothing to the point of hypnotism.

After watching the waves roll in for a while, I twisted around to look up at the tall clockpost behind me. It was already half past eight. Even if the train were to roll in at that exact moment, it still took about twenty minutes to reach our intended station, and classes started at ten till. This being the case, I resigned myself to the fact that there was no longer any hope of making it to school on time and closed my eyes to try to fit in a quick catnap.

Not long after, one of the girls sitting across from me said something that made my ears perk up.

“So hey… Have you ever heard of the Urashima Tunnel?” she asked her friend.

“Uh-oh,” the other girl groaned. “This isn’t another ghost story, is it?”

“Nah, not exactly. I mean, it’s supernatural, yeah, but more in an urban legend sorta way.”

“A *scary* urban legend?”

“Maaaybe?”

“Nope. Nuh-uh. Don’t wanna hear it.”

“Aw, c’mon. There’s no ghosts involved, I promise. Anyway, the basic gist is that it’s a tunnel that can grant any wish to those who enter it.”

“*Any* wish? Just by walking into it?”

“Yep. *Any* wish.”

“Huh… And that’s all there is to it?”

“No, but see, this is the part where it gets kinda spooky… So, like, say you’ve gotten your wish, right? And now you’re ready to go back home. But the Urashima Tunnel doesn’t let you leave that easily. It always takes something from *you* in return.”

“And what’s that?”

“Years. Years and years off of your life. Go in a teenager, and you’ll come back out as a wrinkly old woman.”

“Whoa… So it’s like, would you trade all the best years of your life to be a billionaire or whatever?”

“Yeah, exactly!”

“Gosh, that *is* kinda spooky to think about.”

“See, I told you!”

The two girls prattled on—*Oh my God, speaking of spooky, I found this* huge *spider in my room yesterday! Ew, seriously? Yeah, I had my grandpa come in and whack it with a rolled-up newspaper. Ha ha, your grandpa’s kind of a badass. Yeah, he’s great*—ditching one topic in favor of the next at the speed of light and crumpling up the previous like day-old newspapers, only good for killing spiders. But I reached my hand into that recycle bin to fish out the one article that piqued my interest from all the ones they discarded to save it from the shredder, then smoothed it out in my mind to give it another look.

The Urashima Tunnel: a mysterious passage that dramatically aged all those who entered it, yet which would grant them any wish in return. It was my first time hearing this particular urban legend, though I could tell from the name and time shenanigans alone that it was based on the tale of Urashima Taro. While “granting one’s every wish” was a fairly tired cliché for stories like this, the “rapidly aging” part was at least pretty unique. I wondered what would happen if someone went in that tunnel and wished to grow *younger*. Would it cheat the system, or would they simply grow younger briefly before turning into an old coot the moment they stepped back out? What if they wished for an infinite supply of youth serum they could take with them? Or immortality?

Yeah, this is just asking for people to find loopholes, I thought to myself as I opened my eyes to see that the train had finally arrived. I glanced at the clock—it was thirty-five minutes late. Yet thanks to nodding off for a bit with some interesting food for thought, it hadn’t felt that long at all. There was no blood or anything on the front of the train that might

suggest it had run over a deer; it looked the same as always. I boarded the train via the rear doors and let out a heavy sigh of relief as the merciful air-conditioning slowly cooled my sunbaked body centimeter by centimeter. As soon as I fell backward into the nearest open seat, the pneumatic doors wheezed shut, and the train set off again toward its destination.

"Thank you for choosing to ride with us today. We'd like to express our sincerest apologies to all of our passengers, so please listen carefully to the following announcement…"

Wait a minute, I found myself thinking out of the blue as the announcer read off one of his employer's canned apologies. *Weren't we supposed to get a new transfer student today?*

Kozaki High was only a stone's throw away from the nearest station, and it was the school pretty much everyone who lived in the vicinity attended, aside from the extreme over- and underachievers. Despite being out in the boonies, it was pretty much your average high school. Sure, the building could have used a renovation, and you did get the occasional fox or tanuki wandering out on the athletic field, but otherwise it was perfectly unremarkable.

After changing out of my street shoes in the entryway, I made my way to Classroom 2-A. I'd shown up right in the middle of passing period, so it didn't strike me as abnormal to see a bunch of students out chatting in the halls—but when I reached the top of the stairs and rounded the corner, I was a little taken aback to see that a sizable crowd had formed right outside my classroom. At first I wondered if someone had shattered a window or if a fight had broken out. Then the light bulb went off in my head, and I realized they were probably just here to see the new transfer student. Our teacher had mentioned that we'd be getting a "new girl in class," so some curious onlookers were to be expected, but I figured she had to be pretty cute to garner this much attention. I shoved through the rubbernecks and into the classroom, and the moment I made it inside, I saw her.

In her classy, vintage pinafore dress, she gave off an almost radiant glow compared to the other girls in class, who were all wearing their

faculty-mandated sailor-style uniforms. I assumed they simply hadn't prepared a uniform for the new girl yet, but her current outfit made her stand out so dramatically from the rest of us that it almost looked like someone had lazily snipped her out of whatever scene she originally belonged in and hastily photoshopped her into this one. Though to be sure, her pretty face didn't hurt either. Her long, straight, jet-black hair lent her an air of staunch maturity at first glance, but her large, almond-shaped eyes did a lot to soften her overall vibe. The way she seemed totally engrossed in whatever book she was reading while still maintaining perfect upright sitting posture was pretty charming too.

By all accounts, she was easily as pretty—if not more so—than Koharu Kawasaki, who was widely regarded as the hottest girl in our class. Yet for whatever reason, she also seemed a bit *too* well put-together, almost to the point of feeling unapproachable. Indeed, despite her being the talk of the school, thus far, no one had proven brave enough to reach out to her. Everyone seemed pretty content to admire the new transfer student from a distance. I wasn't about to be the first one to extend the olive branch either, so I simply trudged over to my desk on the hallway side of the classroom and took a seat.

"Kaoru! What's up, dude?" said a chipper voice from behind me.

"Not much, man," I replied, spinning around in my chair to face him.

It was Shohei Kaga, my best friend in the class. Given his tall stature, short spiky hair, and extremely candid way of speaking, you could have been forgiven for pegging him as your stereotypical meathead jock—but in reality, he was an indoorsy kid with some pretty highbrow hobbies. He was a member of the school's calligraphy club, and he even liked to build model ships in bottles during his spare time.

"Heard your train ran over a deer?"

"Yeah."

"Dang, feels like that's been happenin' a lot lately. I'm kinda jealous. I mean, as someone who takes his own set of wheels to school, I never get to benefit from that kind of little accident."

“Yeah, well. Try sitting on your ass outside for half an hour in the middle of summer—or the dead of winter—and *then* tell me how jealous you are.”

“I mean…I’m not any more protected from the elements on my moped, y’know.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded.

Shohei shot a quick glance over at the new girl. “…Bet they never have to worry about accidents like that over in Tokyo.”

“Sure they do. All the time.”

“Aw, no way. There ain’t no deer in Tokyo.”

“Plenty of suicidal salarymen, though.”

“…Dude, you say some pretty messed up stuff sometimes.” Shohei grimaced as though he’d never been more disgusted with me in his life.

To be fair, that was probably a pretty tasteless joke on my part—though I didn’t like how he made it sound like this was a regular occurrence for me. Still, it was probably a good idea to change the subject. “Anyway, why are we comparing ourselves to Tokyo, again?”

“Oh, ’cause that’s where Ms. H said the new kid was from.”

Ah. Ms. Hamamoto was our homeroom teacher, a new instructor who’d just been hired by the school that year. Though for the record, she was not the sort of hot young female teacher that the average teenage boy might fantasize about.

“Wow. Big city girl, huh?”

“Yeah, she’s gotta be miserable here, man. Imagine moving out to the sticks after living in Tokyo all your life.”

“No kidding.” I laughed it off as I took another look at her. “You think she’s going through culture shock or what?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I dunno, it just seems like she’s isolating herself from the rest of us. Wonder what’s going on with her.”

“Oh yeah?” Shohei perked up. “Lonely girl’s caught your eye, eh? Don’t blame you—she *is* pretty cute.”

“Nah, not like that. Just curious what her deal is, that’s all.”

“Well, her name’s Anzu Hanashiro, FYI. And lemme tell ya, she seems like a *real* character, my guy,” Shohei said, then proceeded to launch into a pretty amusing anecdote.

Apparently, Ms. H had explained to the class that this new girl—Anzu Hanashiro—had moved to Kozaki due to family matters, though it was her first time ever transferring schools. But when the teacher asked her to say a few words to introduce herself to the class, the girl shot back with, and I quote: “No, I’m good, thanks. Can I sit now?” According to Shohei, Ms. H had been so rattled by this unexpected insubordination that she couldn’t even sputter out a response.

I could believe it too. In the brief time while Shohei related this little story to me, I’d watched one of our other classmates go up to the new girl and try to talk to her, only to be shot down with “Could you not? I’m trying to read here.”

“Well… Guess I can see how she became such a loner.” I shook my head with a sigh of laughter.

“Too bad, though… She could be really cute if she were a little more friendly,” Shohei lamented. “Whatever. I just hope no one tries to mess with her.”

“Eh, I’m sure she’ll be fine. She seems way too headstrong to let anyone get under her skin,” I replied. I had more important things to focus on today than some new transfer student; there was a quiz coming up next period. I pulled out my math textbook and notes from my book bag. However, before I could even start my little last-minute cram session, the bell rang, and second period began.

Despite her not-so-minor personality quirks, the Hanashiro girl quickly proved to be surprisingly adept at just about everything she did. She answered every question the teacher threw at her in no time flat, and in gym

class she outran the fastest kids on the track team. Yet when the other girls in class praised her accomplishments, she never once bragged or boasted; she simply gave them a cold, uncomprehending stare, as though she were judging them for finding something so trivial impressive. A few of my more daring classmates attempted to invite her to join their respective clubs or sports teams, but she rejected them all with the same curt disinterest.

By all accounts, Anzu Hanashiro seemed to have no intention of making friends with anyone at school, and she spent pretty much every minute of free time between classes reading her book. Normally, you'd think people would be quick to sneer and reject a standoffish nonconformist outsider like her, but it seemed the academic and athletic prowess she displayed were enough to take her from "awkward weirdo" to "misunderstood prodigy" in most of my classmates' heads. By the time lunch rolled around, she'd settled firmly into her niche as a quintessential example of the "lone wolf" archetype, and most were content to leave her be and admire her from afar. But her newfound popularity didn't sit well with *everyone* in our class.

"Hey, new kid. Be a good girl and go buy me a Cheerio Cola at the vending machine downstairs, why don't you?" said this new challenger as she waltzed up to Anzu's desk and slammed a hundred-yen coin on top of it.

It was Koharu Kawasaki—the aforementioned "hottest girl in class" according to popular consensus. With her bleached tawny hair in a permed, wavy, shoulder-length bob, her clearly less-than-finger-length skirt, and the backs of her indoor shoes crushed beneath her heels, she was pretty much a walking example of every possible school dress code violation. She was a very attractive girl, to be sure, but her haughty swagger and snobbish superiority complex definitely knocked her down a few rungs in my book. On top of that, thanks to all the rumors swirling around campus that she was dating one of the most notorious delinquents in the senior class, no one ever dared challenge her, which only inflated her ego all the more. With such a dangerous upperclassman at her back, it was plain to see how she'd remained the undisputed queen bee of our class for so long.

"What's 'Cheerio'?" Anzu inquired, eyeing the coin suspiciously.

“Wait, huh?” Koharu balked. “You’ve never heard of Cheerio before?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Reeeally… Well, whatever. You’re a smart girl. I’m sure you can find it.”

“Will a hundred yen be enough?”

“’Course it will.”

“Does it at least taste good?”

“Uh, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Do they have other flavors too, or just the cola?”

“Just shut up and go already!” Koharu growled as she kicked the desk next to Anzu’s as hard as she could.

Anzu didn’t even flinch. She just stood up, expressionless, and walked out of the classroom without a word.

Koharu watched her leave, then strutted back over to her own desk, plopped her butt down, and started bragging to her posse of followers. “See? Told you she was faking it. Just gotta know how to show her who’s boss.”

Only a couple of minutes later, Anzu returned, Cheerio Cola in hand. Koharu sat with a smug grin on her face as her new servant walked over to deliver the soda she ordered. Then her jaw dropped in horror as Anzu looked her straight in the eye, cracked open the can, and proceeded to chug the whole thing right in front of her. The whole class looked on in silent awe and disbelief as the new girl held the can aloft, slowly turning it all the way upside down to suck out every last drop, before finally releasing the metallic rim from her glossy pink lips with a sigh of contentment.

“Thanks. That hit the spot.” Anzu slammed the empty soda can on Koharu’s desk before walking back to her own and reopening her book as if nothing had happened.

After a good five-second delay, Koharu finally exploded and jumped out of her seat to go give Anzu a piece of her mind. Unfortunately for

Koharu (though fortunately for the rest of us), at that exact moment, the teacher came walking into class. She was forced to stomp back to her desk after no more than a click of the tongue and an icy glare. Then came the whispers from the peanut gallery.

“Holy crap. Is it just me, or is the new girl kind of a badass?”

“Man, what I wouldn’t give to put Kawasaki in her place.”

“Dude, did you see those chugging skills?! I bet that girl knows how to party.”

Koharu’s face went bright red—redder than a can of Cheerio Cola, you could say. Even I had to admit that it was pretty impressive for Anzu to teach the class queen bee a lesson in humility on her first day.

At the same time, it only cemented in my head the fact that I would never in a million years have a chance to get to know this girl. We would probably go all the way to graduation without ever exchanging a single word and then forget all about each other within a matter of months. She was clearly far too much of a free spirit to ever take an interest in a boring conformist like me, and it wasn’t like I felt some compelling urge to reach out to her either. The worlds we lived in were just too different to ever intertwine. Simple as that.

Despite all the excitement surrounding the new transfer student, the rest of the day went by as slowly and uneventfully as always. When sixth period got out and we were finally released for the day, I grabbed my book bag and stood from my chair—only to be accosted by a still very much pissed-off Koharu.

“Tono,” she muttered grumpily.

“What’s up?” I said, turning around to face her.

“Go buy me an ice cream.”

For reference, she was referring to the Sentan-brand old-fashioned vanilla cones they sold at the student store. They came prepackaged in a clear plastic shell, with a perfectly shaped sphere of processed ice cream on top. Not that it really mattered much.

“With what money?” I replied.

“What, you don’t expect *me* to pay for it, do you?”

From prior experience, I knew better than to talk back to her on this. Though it pained me to admit, she’d been treating me like her personal errand boy since the start of the current school year. I still vividly remembered that fateful day—I was walking down the hall, minding my own business, when out of the blue, she asked me if she could borrow a hundred yen, and I figured why not. Then she asked me for another hundred yen the very next day, and while I did voice a complaint, it was still such a small amount of money that I begrudgingly acquiesced. She’d pegged me as a sap ever since, and every now and again would come by to ask me for money or to go buy things for her. I took no pride in being easily manipulated, for the record—but every time I tried to protest, the third-year goons she always paraded around with would look at me like I was asking for a fight. I most certainly was not, so I always caved in the end.

“Fine, whatever,” I relented.

“Good. Now get going. Chop-chop!” she called after me as I headed out of the classroom to go buy her stupid ice cream. As I descended the stairs, however, someone poked my shoulder. Startled, I spun around—but it was only Shohei.

“Dude, you can’t let her walk over you *that* easily,” he said, shaking his head as he jumped down a few stairs to get on my level.

“Look, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, all right? And after what happened earlier, I really don’t think it’d be a good idea to rile the beast,” I said, trying to play it off with a joke.

Shohei wasn’t having any of it. He smacked me lightly in the back with his book bag and then shook his head with a disapproving frown. “Nah, man. The more you enable her, the more she’s gonna keep taking advantage of you.”

“Well, yeah, but I think you’re forgetting about her scary-ass boyfriend. I’m not trying to have her go tell him and his buddies to kick the crap out of me on my way home just because I said the wrong thing.”

“That ain’t gonna happen.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“Dude, you really think a senior’s gonna risk getting expelled over something that petty during the most stressful part of his high school career? He’s probably worried enough as it is, what with entrance exams and finding a job and whatnot. Besides, we don’t even know if those two are actually dating. From what I’ve heard, no one’s ever seen ’em walking around together like a couple.”

“You mean you think Kawasaki might be *letting* those rumors swirl around to make people more afraid of her?”

“Hard to say. Maybe she’s the one who started ’em. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

I certainly couldn’t disagree with that. She did love her power trips, after all. “…Nah, I can’t believe she’d play into the rumors if there weren’t *some* truth to it. I mean, that’d only make things worse for her when he eventually found out and set the record straight, wouldn’t it? Anyway, don’t worry about me. I don’t care enough to kick up a fuss over such a small amount of money.”

I meant it too. If a few hundred yen was all it cost to keep me on Koharu’s good side, then it was a small price to pay.

Shohei let out another exaggerated sigh. “Man, you don’t have any backbone at all, do you?”

“I mean, do I really need one?”

“If you wanna be successful in life and not get bossed around all the time? Yes. Hell, just look at the new girl. You could learn a thing or two from her.”

“Pretty sure that amount of backbone only causes more problems in the long run. Besides, it’s not like I’m *totally* spineless or anything.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“It’s more like I’ve turned being spineless into my primary defense mechanism.”

“And that makes it less pathetic how, exactly?”

“Well, think about it like this. Did you know that most utility poles are actually hollow on the inside? It’s because that makes them sturdier and less likely to fall over under their own weight in the event of an impact. I’m basically doing the same thing. By being spineless from the get-go, I’ve got nothing to lose. No matter how hard someone might hit me, I’ll only bend—never break. I know it might sound counterintuitive to someone like you, but it’s actually a pretty high-level strategy.”

Shohei looked extremely dubious. “You’re screwin’ with me, aren’t you?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

He immediately kneed me in the thigh.

“Ow! All right, all right! Cut it out!” I whined, barely managing to dodge out of the way as he went in for a second strike. *Phew, that was close.* One might be forgiven for thinking a simple knee to the femur wouldn’t hurt *that* bad—but boy, did it ever.

“You’ve gotta start takin’ this crap more seriously, dude,” said Shohei.

“That was a cheap shot, man…”

I was still rubbing my thigh in a vain attempt to make the pain go away quicker when we arrived at the student store. I hurried over to the freezer, belatedly remembering that ice cream products always sold out fast this time of year. Thankfully, one of the aforementioned vanilla cones remained, the tip of its cone sticking out of the trove of other assorted frozen treats.

“Phew, thank God. All right, lemme just buy this and then we can get outta here.” I reached down to pull it out of the freezer.

“Hang on. Let me see that thing for a sec.”

“Okaaay…” I said, handing it over begrudgingly.

“Now watch this,” Shohei said, then flicked the tip of the upside-down cone with one finger. It snapped right off and shattered inside the

plastic casing.

“Hey! What the hell, man?!”

“Well, would ya look at that. Guess being hollow ain’t always the best strategy after all.”

“Yeah, wow. You really proved your point with that cheap ice cream cone. Great job.” I snatched it back from him to size up the damage. “Oh, great… This thing’s gonna dribble out all over her shirt while she’s eating it…”

“Heh. And how is that a bad thing, exactly?” Shohei said with a snicker.

“Yeah, easy for you to say. You’re not the one who’ll have to deal with the fallout.”

“Aw, don’t worry about it, dude. She probably won’t even notice until after she opens it up. And if she does, you can say it was like that when you bought it. Besides, it was your money—you deserve to get at least a *little* payback for your buck.”

“I’m not sure payback’s what I’m looking for…”

“Well, it should be.” Shohei turned to look me straight in the eye. “You’re not a hollow utility pole or a flimsy ice cream cone, dude. You’ve gotta stand up for yourself sometimes. Show a little backbone! Stand up to her!”

“…If she ever pisses me off enough, I will.”

“Heh. Yeah, that’ll be the day…” Shohei scoffed under his breath.

After delivering Koharu’s ice cream cone, I bolted off campus like a bat out of hell. Then, just like every other day, I headed home via the same train that brought me to school in the morning. It was a pretty short commute, all things considered; I typically gazed out the window or played around on my phone, and it was over before I knew it. When the train pulled into my station, I got up and showed the driver my rail pass. By this point, he knew me well enough that this was really just a formality; he

didn’t even glance over to examine it. I pressed the OPEN button next to the double doors and hopped off the train, whereupon I was greeted by the same searing heat and cicada choir I’d suffered that morning. In no time at all, I could feel the sweat starting to seep through my shirt, and I found myself wishing that someone would add an extension to the rail line just so I could take the nice, cool train all the way to my front door.

I followed the white line down the shoulder of the road, keeping my head lowered so as not to be blinded by the harsh rays of sunlight. Just along this street, past an independently owned rice dealer and an old fire station I’d never once seen with its doors unshuttered, was my humble abode. It was still only the very beginning of summer, yet the black pavement shone like a mirror, shimmering as though it were covered in a thin layer of water. I remembered seeing a TV documentary once about these particular road mirages that said they only appeared when the temperature rose above thirty-five degrees Celsius. Thirty-five degrees. No wonder it felt so blisteringly hot. Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I gazed up at the sun and squinted to convey my disapproval. Finding it much too bright to keep staring at, I brought my eyes back to the road. That’s when it happened.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a young girl standing farther down the road and stopped dead in my tracks, blinking a few times to make sure it wasn’t the sunspots in my eyes. She wore a slightly oversized tank top and denim shorts that showed off her naturally tanned skin, and a little ponytail dangled out from the back of her baseball cap. Even from a distance, it was plain to see that her once bright-red sandals were well worn and faded, something that only emphasized her outdoorsy, adventurous nature.

“See that? That’s the line where the rain stops!” she said with her back to me, pointing ahead to where the road began to glisten in the sunlight. Her voice was soft and delicate, yet it rang clearly in my ears. I supposed that wasn’t too surprising, given that every other noise of the afternoon, even the incessant chirping cicadas, had suddenly gone quiet. An eerie silence fell over the neighborhood, almost as if it were frozen in time.

The girl turned around and grinned at me with the bubbliest, most effervescent smile I'd ever seen.

It was her. Karen. My little sister.

"Look, Kaoru! See how it always dries up by the time we get close?! But I bet if we ran fast enough, there'd still be at least a *few* puddles left on the ground!"

An intense wave of déjà vu washed over my entire body.

Right, I remember now. Back then, we didn't know it was just a mirage, so we were trying to come up with an explanation for how there could be rain-slicked streets beneath clear blue skies—some sort of dividing line between rain and shine.

I wanted to tell her. Desperately, I did. Now that I was in high school, explaining how heat mirages worked should have been no trouble at all. But I couldn't do it. My body seized up like I was suffering from sleep paralysis, and I couldn't squeeze out a single word. The only part of me still in motion was my heart, which threatened to beat right out of my chest.

"Hey, what's the matter? Why are you just standing there?" she asked. "If you're not coming, then I'm gonna go on ahead without you."

Karen turned her back to me once more and started to walk off. I tried to call after her, but again, the words wouldn't come. The only sounds I could wring out from my parched throat were a few haggard breaths. All the words I tried and failed to cry out—*come back, wait, don't go*—remained trapped in my lungs, swirling around in a toxic haze with all the other things I'd left unsaid. My chest burned with the urge to let them all out, but my mind raced too fast to even remember to breathe, and I started getting lightheaded. Before I knew it, Karen had disappeared into the shimmering heat haze that hung in the air above the asphalt. Once again, I could do nothing to stop it.

Then, all at once, the cacophony of cicadas came back in full force, almost as though they'd just returned from lunch break. The beads of sweat that had been waiting politely on the tips of my lashes finally trickled into my corneas, and I reflexively closed my eyes tight to purge them of the sting of salt. I ran as fast as I could the rest of the way home.

When I made it back to the house, I reached into my book bag for my keys and let myself in the front door. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to how dark it was inside—though that probably had more to do with how blindingly bright it had been outside than anything else. I went straight up to my room to change into a T-shirt and shorts, then headed back to the kitchen. After taking a minute to catch my breath and quench my thirst with a glass of iced barley tea, I made my way to the traditional-style sitting room. It was a modest space—just eight tatami mats in total—with few decorations aside from a hanging wall scroll in the alcove that depicted a pleasant mountain scene. Now that my eyes had had a chance to adjust to the darker indoor lighting, looking out over the veranda through the sliding doors was like peering into a totally different world—one much more vibrant than ours.

I walked over and sat with my legs crossed atop a floor cushion laid out in a corner of the room, right in front of the altar we had set up in honor of my sister Karen. She had been my only sibling, just two years younger than me, and had died five years prior after a tragic and accidental fall.

It had been a sweltering summer's day, same as this one. Karen and I had taken our insect cage and butterfly net and gone looking for bugs in the nearby woods. We were specifically out searching for rhinoceros beetles, but by the time evening rolled around, we still hadn't found a single one. It wasn't as if we had some huge desire to catch one either, but we *had* told our mom that we'd bring back a big one that'd knock her socks off, and we were both too stubborn to give up yet. So you can imagine our delight when we spotted not one but two beetles hanging out together up high on a very tall tree—a rhinoceros *and* a stag. We were determined to do whatever it took to catch them both.

"Lieutenant Karen! We have a problem!" I barked, affecting a militaristic voice for the hell of it. Karen was happy to play along and gave me a stalwart salute.

"What is it, Sergeant Kaoru, sir?!"

"Our net will never reach that high!"

“Good God! Those bastards really have our backs against the wall this time, sir!”

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at this. “Pfft! Where the heck did you learn to talk like that?”

“I heard it on TV!” she said with a mischievous smirk.

“Shoulda known.” I grinned right back at her.

To be sure, the two beetles were far too high to reach without actually climbing the tree. Yet there were no branches to grab within arm’s reach either, so that option was off the table too.

“Yeah, no way I can jump that high,” I concluded. “So what do we do now?”

“I mean…it seems pretty obvious to me. We’re just gonna have to climb up there.”

“What? No way. There’s not even anything to grab this far down…”

“Gosh, you’re dumb. Try thinking outside the box for once!”

“What, do you have a better idea?”

“Yeah! You can give me a boost! Then I should at least be able to reach that lowest branch, right?”

I looked up at the branch she was referring to. It was a good two meters off the ground. “…Isn’t that a little dangerous?”

“Aw, it’ll be fine! I’m a tree-climbing pro!”

“I dunno about this, Karen…”

“If we don’t hurry up, they’re gonna fly away!”

She had a point. This very well could have been our last chance of the day. With that in mind, I reluctantly decided to go along with Karen’s proposal.

“All right, we’ll give it a shot,” I said. “But you be careful up there, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. C’mon, let me get on your shoulders.”

I knelt down. Karen flung off the old, beat-up red sandals she loved so much and then climbed onto my back. Holding her by the ankles, I stood upright and hoisted her toward the branch, which she quickly clambered onto with no trouble at all. She climbed so effortlessly from branch to branch that she almost looked like a monkey—though of course I didn't say that out loud, since it might come off a little rude. Still, I was pretty sure she could handle herself from there, so I brought my gaze down to give my aching neck a rest.

Looking back, that was probably the final nail in her coffin. I never should have taken my eyes off of her, even for a split second. The rest was kind of a blur—almost like it happened in fast-forward. All of a sudden, I heard the sound of a branch snapping overhead, and instantly I looked up. It was too late. Karen was in freefall, tumbling headfirst back to the ground. I still remembered the audible *crack* of her skull hitting the hard earth.

It all happened so fast. I stood there stunned for a good five, ten seconds, before finally coming back to my senses and calling out to her. She was already gone. Not a drop of blood on the ground, but she was no longer breathing.

I didn't remember much about what happened after that—just that I got really, really scared and ran away as fast as I could until I found an adult in the nearby neighborhood who could help. I didn't know for sure that she was dead until my parents told me the next day—the one small mercy being that the autopsy apparently determined she died immediately on impact and hadn't suffered in the slightest.

Nevertheless, from then on, not a single day went by where I didn't think about what I could've done differently. If I'd only refused to boost her up, or told her it was getting late and we should head home, or never gone out bug catching that day to begin with…Karen would almost certainly still be alive.

I sat there in silence before her altar for a time, then lit a stick of incense and rang the little bell as I continued penning apology letters to her in my head, ones I knew would only ever be returned to sender.

When I could sense my legs were about to go numb, I got up and headed into the kitchen to get dinner ready. I put some rice in the removable ceramic pot and swished it around with tap water to wash off the starch, switching the water out five times in total. I always had a hard time remembering how many times I'd done it, so my trick was to only swirl it around with as many fingers as the number of times I'd drained and refilled the water. The first cycle, I used only my pointer finger; the second, my pointer and middle; the third, those two plus my ring finger—like so. When I finally finished, I put the bowl in the rice cooker and pressed the Quick Cook button.

Today, I would be making German potato salad. After pulling all the necessary ingredients from the fridge, I set about chopping them into bite-sized pieces, then sautéed the onions, garlic, and bacon on the stove. Ever since Mom up and vanished right after Karen's death, I'd taken over all dinner-making responsibilities, since my father couldn't cook to save his life. However, we also couldn't eat takeout every night, so it was kind of just something I had to man up and learn how to do.

When the potato salad was complete, I put half of it on a plate with plastic wrap and shoved it in the fridge for my father. I then headed over to the living room to scarf down my portion alone while flipping between a few different prime-time talk shows, my chopsticks only ever stopping to laugh at a particularly funny joke or when I felt the random urge to mutter something aloud to myself. All the shows in the seven o'clock block were pretty damn hilarious—and yet, funnily enough, I could never remember a single one of the jokes after I turned the TV off.

After soaking my dishes in the sink, I headed back to my room and fell forward onto my bed, using my pillow to prop up my chest as I killed time listening to music for a while, then read a bit of manga. In no time at all, my eyelids grew heavy, and my neck started getting sore as I began to nod off. I knew I still needed to take a bath before going to bed, but the sudden wave of fatigue proved too formidable to resist, and I drifted off into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Or at least I did for a while, until I was startled awake by a series of loud thumping and crashing sounds coming from downstairs. Already I knew the culprit was no common burglar—even in my half-sleeping torpor, I had a pretty good idea as to what was going on down there. So, I decided not to pay it any mind, laid my head back on my pillow, and closed my eyes once more.

"Kaoru! Get down here!"

Ugh. Goddammit.

I got out of bed and took a deep breath before heading into the living room, where I found my father, who'd gotten back from his job at the town hall. He had yet to change out of his slacks and button-down shirt, and he was sitting on a floor cushion at the low table. His face was flushed red, and he looked positively drunk. I watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he glugged a tall glass of water. His cheeks were gaunt, and specks of gray were peppered here and there in his disheveled mop of hair. He was really starting to look old—though I supposed that was to be expected of a man in his fifties. Once he finished guzzling it down, he slammed the cup on the table so hard that I thought it might shatter.

"Draw me a bath," he demanded, not looking away from the TV for even a second to make eye contact with me. For the record, the TV was not turned on, so I had no idea what he thought he was watching.

"Sorry, I'll get right on that." I headed toward the bathroom. Just then, I stepped right in the middle of something mushy with my bare foot, and a chill shot down my spine. As I slowly pulled my foot back out of it, I saw that it was the German potato salad I'd made, splattered all across the tatami mats. Some was sticking to the wall, which led me to believe that he'd thrown the entire plate of food against it. Sure enough, I spotted the shattered ceramic shards near the baseboard.

"Hey! What're you standin' around for?! You got somethin' to say to me?!" he roared.

"Nope, I sure don't," I replied, then kept walking over to the bathroom. It was true—I really couldn't have cared less about him

demanding I pull a bath for him, or him throwing my potato salad against the wall, or even him breaking a plate.

I felt only pity for my father, who'd lost both Karen and my mother at almost the exact same time. I understood that there was no real chance of him ever serving as a functional father figure for me again after that, and I'd come to accept it. Not to mention my immense guilt for having been the one person who was with Karen when she died, and thus the only one who could have prevented it. My heart was so full up with pity, guilt, and regret that there wasn't room for a single iota of anger to enter the mix.

My father had once been an extremely mild-mannered man, but Karen's death and the resulting fallout had hit him so hard that he became completely unstable. While there were plenty of times like this one where he'd lose his temper and start throwing things at me, there were also times when he'd become weirdly affectionate. At first, I tried to do whatever I could as his son to help dampen those massive mood swings, but then one day, he said something that made me stop caring altogether.

"Should've been you that died. Not her."

It had been a frigid night in the winter of my eighth-grade year. The second my father came bumbling in the door, plastered, he said those words straight to my face, with the same intonation in which one might have said "Boy, it's cold out there!" I honestly couldn't blame him for feeling that way; I was surprisingly calm and accepting of the sentiment. It didn't rattle or hurt me one bit. What it *did* do, however, was pull the plug on any desire I might have felt to grow closer to my father and help him get back on his feet. All that went swirling down the drain when I finally realized that he'd never thought of me as his son in the first place.

I was the product of an affair my mother had with another man—something I learned when I was just eight years old, but about which to this day I still didn't know all the details. Despite how young I was at the time, I had recognized that it was a very taboo topic that I probably shouldn't pry into, especially since I didn't really feel any need to know more. My mother loved me very much, and even my father was genuinely sweet to me at the time, despite the lack of biological connection. In my primitive child brain, I assumed that any prior adultery was a trivial mistake that had long since

been forgiven. I was pretty sure that was how Karen felt about it too. So, despite that tiny bit of awkward tension, we still loved each other and got along as well as any family could ever hope to. We were the Tonos, and nothing would ever change that.

Then Karen died, and everything fell apart. Any semblance of familial harmony went straight out the window. Yet even now I often found myself wondering how things might have been different if I really *had* been the one to die instead, like my father said. Though I was pretty sure the answer went without saying.

I twisted the faucet and used the showerhead to wash the potato salad off my foot. Then I filled the tub, kicked on the gas, and gave the bathwater some time to heat up. Figuring I'd only get yelled at again later if I didn't clean up the potato salad and broken plate, I trudged back to the living room with heavy footsteps, only to find that my father was zonked out cold on the floor. The cranky drunkard had gone, and in his place was a man lying slovenly on the ground with his mouth hanging wide open. He looked, quite frankly, ridiculous.

"Heh… Glad I didn't inherit those genes."

Enough about that. I still had cleaning to do, and I wanted to get it done while my father was still asleep if at all possible. I gathered the fractured plate shards and wiped the splattered gobs of potato salad from the floor and wall. Strangely, the potato salad was a bit lukewarm to the touch, which told me he must have zapped it in the microwave. I couldn't possibly imagine what had possessed him to go from "Sure, I'll eat this" to throwing it against the wall in no time flat. Then again, I could never comprehend my father's mood swings. Nor did I have any desire to.

Having finished the cleanup, I returned to the bathroom. After verifying that the water was sufficiently warm, I turned off the heat. It would have been nice if we had a dedicated water heater that could do this with a single push of a button, but unfortunately our house was much too old for that. I glanced at the clock—it was getting pretty close to midnight. Normally, I would have turned in for the night by then, but because I had

dozed off for a bit earlier in the evening, I wasn't actually feeling all that sleepy.

So I decided to go out and get some fresh air. After lacing up my sneakers in the entryway, I slipped out the front door and into the pleasant summer night. It was the perfect weather for a nice, long walk.

About thirty minutes later, I found myself walking along the train tracks. I went out on nighttime walks like this pretty frequently, but this was the first time I'd ever been inspired to turn down the tracks and see where they went. More than anything, it was a sudden urge to recreate an iconic scene I remembered from an old movie—but now that I was actually doing it, it turned out to be a lot more fun than I was expecting. There was a sort of devilish thrill in doing something so brazen that you could never get away with it in the daytime. Something exhilarating about wobbling along one of the rails like a balance beam, right into a deserted train station. The sound of the rocks clacking together beneath my feet was pleasing to my ear too, albeit a bit loud. Thankfully I knew that no one else would be out walking around at this hour, so I didn't pay it much mind. There weren't really any streetlights in this part of town, but the luminescent moon overhead meant that I could see my surroundings perfectly. It glowed so brightly that on a cloudless night like this, you could have been forgiven for thinking the sun hadn't yet set.

In fact, it had been a night just like this when I saw my first shooting stars. Karen and I were sitting out on the veranda, looking up at the night sky in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the Perseid meteor shower. I managed to spot three shooting stars that night, but Karen kept nodding off and ultimately went the whole night without seeing a single one. She was so distraught about it the next morning, it looked like she was going to cry, but I assured her she'd have another chance next time. In the end, that next time never came. As a child, I'd heard it said that when you die, you turn into one of the billions of stars that light up the night sky. If that was true, then I hoped Karen had found herself a nice, secluded corner of the universe from which she could watch meteor showers each and every day. I'd like that for her.

After walking along the tracks for about an hour, I finally came to a stop. Not because I hit a dead end, mind you, but because I'd reached the entrance to a long, dark tunnel. It was the same one my train passed through every morning on the way to school, so I knew exactly where it went—though I sure as hell didn't have the balls to go waltzing in there all by myself in the dead of night. So I turned on my heel to head back the way I came. Then I noticed something.

Off in the ditch to the side of the tracks, I spotted an old wooden handrail engulfed in a sea of tall grass. Curious, I brushed the overgrowth aside to find a small set of stairs leading down on the seaward side of the rails. It descended at a fairly peculiar angle, which explained why I'd never seen it before when looking out the window from my seat on the train. I figured it was probably just an access stairway for railroad maintenance workers, yet it wasn't roped off with a Keep Out sign or anything of the sort. Unable to resist my curiosity, I decided to take a look and see what was down there, my heart beating faster with every step. When I finally reached the bottom, after brushing several spider webs out of my face, I found myself standing in a small clearing where the vegetation was surprisingly short, right before the entrance to yet another tunnel.

"What, seriously?"

This one was much smaller—only about three meters high—and ran perpendicular to the larger tunnel above. It was built from stone, and the outer rim of the entrance was covered in a thick layer of moss. I couldn't see through to the other side from where I was standing, so there was no telling how far it might go. It gave off such foreboding vibes that I imagined there'd be quite a few scary stories about this place if only it were in a more easily accessible location. No sane person would dare venture into a tunnel like this. Ninety-nine out of one hundred people would get cold feet and turn back. I would have done the same, if I hadn't suddenly recalled that one little tidbit I'd overheard that morning.

"So hey… Have you ever heard of the Urashima Tunnel?"

Nah. No way. I shook that ridiculous notion from my head before it had a chance to take root. That was just a silly urban legend. There wasn't *actually* a tunnel out there that could make any wish come true. Even if there was, the thought of me stumbling upon it in my hometown the very same day I first heard of it was too ridiculous to consider. I was seventeen. I was supposed to know better than to believe in stupid fairy tales by now. The smart thing to do would be to go home and pretend I had never stumbled across this creepy tunnel. As I once more ascended the stairs, I rebuked myself for entertaining the notion. Then on the very last step, I stopped again. What if—and this was a very big if—but *what if* the rumors were true, and the Urashima Tunnel actually did exist? Assuming it really could make any wish come true, then…

Would it be possible to bring Karen back to life?

With only the flashlight function on my cell phone to light the way, I took my first tentative steps into the tunnel. I decided I would only take a quick peek inside, walk in a little ways, and if I didn't find anything, I'd walk right back out. I moved forward slowly, watching my step to make sure I didn't trip or step in anything foul. The smell of raw earth permeated the air. I'd been mentally prepared to come across a dead animal carcass or two, but so far I hadn't seen a single fallen leaf on the ground. In fact, the interior of the tunnel was remarkably clean—free even of the thick moss that lined the perimeter of the entrance. The only really unsettling thing about it was the muggy, lukewarm breeze blowing through. That, combined with the fact that the passage was so narrow, sort of made it feel like I was walking down the throat of a massive, primordial snake.

If my phone were to die right now, I'd be scared out of my mind. Suddenly very concerned about this possibility, I looked down and saw that I had only ten percent battery life remaining. Definitely not enough for me to feel confident going any farther.

Just when I was about to turn back, I saw a faint light shining in the darkness ahead. *Could that be the exit?* I wondered. *Boy, talk about*

anticlimactic. Guess it's an ordinary tunnel after all.

Still, I was more than ready to get out of this dark, musty passage, so I ran toward the light…but as it grew brighter and brighter, I slowly came to realize that it wasn't an exit at all.

"What…in the hell?"

It was a mid-sized torii gate, the type you might see at the entrance to a Shinto shrine. Yet instead of the traditional bright red, this one was colored an off-white that was almost the pigment of human bones. It stood looming there in the middle of the tunnel as if it had been waiting centuries for someone—anyone—to pass beneath its crossbeam. There wasn't just one either. Peering through to the other side, I saw that it was actually an entire corridor of equidistant torii, one after another. Even more bizarrely, the "light" I'd seen earlier had actually come from a series of torches that hung diagonally off the walls between each torii and pointed toward the ceiling. Every flame burned still and bright, hardly wavering in the slightest. Whatever this place was, it clearly held some sort of spiritual or religious significance, and my gut told me I should think twice before going any farther.

I had no idea where I was, nor had I ever heard of there being any ceremonial sites like this anywhere in my neck of the woods. I tried to check my GPS location, but my phone wasn't getting any service—a common occurrence in many parts of Kozaki, to be fair, but right then it was awfully eerie to be totally off the grid. All of a sudden, I was stricken by a deep and primal sense of terror. I needed to get the hell out of there. I should've never gone so far to begin with. But once again, just as I was about to turn back, something a little deeper into the tunnel caught my eye.

"What's that…?"

Something small and red lay on the ground just past the first torii, but the tunnel was too dimly lit for me to make out what it was. I decided I'd take a quick peek before heading back the way I came. With slow and steady footsteps, I passed through the torii and leaned down to get a better look.

Looks like…a sandal?

It was well worn and faded red—small enough to fit a child. I slowly reached down and picked it up to examine it closer. When I saw the name scribbled in permanent marker on the heel strap, my breath caught in my throat.

KAREN

No way. It couldn't be, I thought to myself. Yet it was. This was one of the very same sandals our parents had bought for her all those years ago. I still vividly remembered her asking me if they looked good on her. Even the handwriting was unmistakably hers; the "N" in the name was backward, and she'd always had a bad habit of writing it that way.

But what on earth was it doing *here*? The last time I remembered seeing this particular sandal was, of course, the day she died. The paramedics hadn't collected them when they took her to the hospital, so I'd headed back into the woods to recover them after. I'd found the one with our last name, TONO, written on it in no time at all, right where I remembered her flinging them off before she climbed onto my back. No matter how hard I searched, I had never found the one that said KAREN, even after scouring the entire area for what felt like a month straight. Eventually I just broke down and gave up after a good, long cry.

Those woods had to be at least five kilometers away from here, though, so it made no sense for her sandal to have somehow made its way into this tunnel. This couldn't *actually* be the Urashima Tunnel, could it? No. It was too early to jump to such drastic conclusions. Hell, a stray dog or a crow could have picked it up and dragged it into this place. Surely that was far and away the more likely explanation. Besides, the tunnel hadn't even granted any wishes yet. Sure, I'd gone around looking for this sandal for weeks, but it wasn't the sandal I wanted back—it was Karen herself.

Regardless, I figured I'd find out soon enough if I kept moving forward. If I found Karen at the end, then it was the real deal. If not, it was an ordinary (albeit very weird) tunnel. Slowly, the building anticipation began to win out over any initial misgivings I might have had. Putting the sandal in one pocket and my cell phone in the other, I ventured deeper within, curious to see how far these torii gates went. The torches were almost the more bizarre part, now that I thought about it—how long had

they been burning? It wasn't as if someone could have anticipated me coming in there and lit them specifically for me in advance, so I had to imagine they'd been burning for quite some time. But that begged the question as to how they had enough fuel to keep burning perpetually. There must have been some sort of secret mechanism to it, maybe a floor panel or something that turned them on when someone walked inside. But who would have designed such a thing for a random tunnel so far off the beaten path, and for what purpose? I racked my brain but couldn't come up with a single plausible explanation.

"Karen…? You there?" I called out in a quiet voice that echoed down the tunnel. Though obviously, I knew there would be no response. Until there was.

"…rrr…"

A voice came calling back, though it was so hoarse and frail, I couldn't make out whether it was a child's or an adult's, let alone what gender. Even so, it was definitely a voice, not some trick of the wind. My heart started pounding faster and faster. Someone was in there, just ahead. And if there was even a remote possibility that it might be Karen, I needed to reach her as fast as I could. So I ran. I ran through the next several torii until I heard another sound, then stopped and listened closely. It was a sort of skittering, like that of a large bug or a small animal scurrying. It sounded like it was coming from extremely close, yet I didn't see anything that fit the bill, presumably because it was hiding behind one of the torii pillars. My heart rate quickened further; I tried to tell myself it was a mouse or something and attempted to dash right past it—but whatever it was jumped out at me from behind the next gate.

"Bwaaaaagh!" I screamed, falling onto my ass.

I immediately looked up and saw that a small bird had perched atop the next torii, cocking its head as it looked down at me, apparently unable to comprehend why I'd fallen in fright.

"Friggin' bird… Scared the hell outta me…"

I was so relieved, I couldn't help but laugh. I got back on my feet and peered up at the little troublemaker. He was a tiny fella with bright yellow

feathers—probably someone's pet that had flown away from home. I knew for a fact that we didn't have any birds of his color native to the Kozaki area, at least. In any case, how could he have gotten lost so deep in a tunnel like this?

"Hey, wait a minute… Are you a parakeet, little guy?"

Upon closer inspection, that did indeed seem to be the case. The beady black eyes, the rounded beak—yep, he was just a little budgie. I could tell because we'd had one as a pet way back when. His name had been Kee, and he'd had the same yellow shade of feathers as this guy, down to identical little white specks around his neck. This little birdie looked *a lot* like Kee, in fact—the more I looked at him, the more uncanny the resemblance became… However, I knew that yellow feathers and white speckles weren't that uncommon for parakeets like him. Plus, Kee had been dead for many years. Karen and I had given him a small burial ceremony ourselves and made a tiny grave in the backyard. So…yeah. In no way could this bird possibly be Kee.

No way in hell, I thought to myself as I realized how heavily I was breathing. It seemed the mix of fear and anticipation bubbling up in my gut was finally about to reach a boiling point.

"…rrr…"

The parakeet was trying to say something. I clutched at my chest in a vain attempt to silence my beating heart and tried to lend it an ear.

"Ribbit, ribbit…little frog…"

My heart skipped a beat. It was a miracle it didn't stop completely.

"Hopping through the…swampy bog…"

It couldn't be. There was just no way—it was impossible.

He was singing the exact same nursery rhyme we had taught Kee when we first brought him home. We sang it over and over to him because we thought it would be cute if the three of us could all sing it in a round, but unfortunately all he ever wanted to repeat were the first two lines, and he died before ever learning the rest. This bird sang that song in the exact same way. That was in addition to having the same color feathers and the same

spotted pattern on its neck. This was all, quite frankly, impossible. My brain still ran at light speed, trying desperately to come up with some sort of explanation.

I know—it must be a hallucination! I'm hearing and seeing things because I'm in this creepy tunnel in the middle of the night, and my brain's exhausted. There's probably not even a real bird up there! I bet if I tried to touch it, my hand would go straight through!

Hoping to prove my theory, I reached out to gently poke the parakeet with one finger. The little budgie didn't shy away, even as my finger bumped against its soft lower neck feathers. I felt its muscles spasm as I made contact, along with its subtle body heat—all in a single touch with just one finger. This was no illusion. This was a real, live bird—more specifically, our old pet parakeet. Kee. Alive and well.

"What the hell is going on here…?"

How could an old dead pet of mine be right in front of me? Could this actually be the Urashima Tunnel after all? Even then, how would that explain Kee…? As I stood there grasping at straws, trying so hard to explain the unexplainable, Kee flew off farther into the depths of the tunnel, and I reflexively gave chase. Even if there was still some doubt in my mind about him being the real deal, I certainly didn't want to lose him again.

Then a moment later, I got a sudden sinking feeling in my gut, and I slammed hard on the brakes. Something was gnawing at the back of my brain, almost like I was forgetting something very important. Generally, I was the type of person who tried to take an optimistic view on things like this—like, if it was really so important, I wouldn't have forgotten it. However, something deep inside me was saying I should really think long and hard to try to remember this one. It was like some sort of premonition; I could feel it in my bones. A sense of impending doom slowly built in my chest that I couldn't quite place.

Say this was the Urashima Tunnel. Let's think back to what my one and only source for that rumor had said about it. How had that girl at the train station described it this morning? I replayed their conversation in my head.

“So, like, say you’ve gotten your wish, right? And now you’re ready to go back home.”

No, not that part.

“But the Urashima Tunnel doesn’t let you leave that easily. It always takes something from you *in return.”*

Yeah, right after that. What was it that it took, again?

“Years. Years and years off of your life. Go in a teenager, and you’ll come back out as a wrinkly old woman.”

My stomach dropped.

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

Yes, the Urashima Tunnel could grant any wish, but it took years off your life span as its toll. How could I have forgotten the most important part of the whole urban legend? Now I stood conflicted, torn between the enticing thought that I might find Karen just ahead and the fear of selling my entire life away in exchange. In the end, my fear won out. After all, I had no way of knowing how far this tunnel went, or if I really would find Karen at the other end, so continuing on like this seemed far too dangerous.

Having finally made up my mind, I whirled around and set off sprinting at full speed back the way I came. I exited the tunnel as fast as I could, stumbling so frantically through the dark that I nearly fell over on more than one occasion. Yet when I looked ahead, the entrance seemed much closer than I expected. When I reached it, I practically dove over the threshold back into the outside world, rolling over a few times as my body hit the ground. Despite the stains I’d no doubt gotten all over my clothes, I simply lay there for a while, looking breathlessly up at the night sky as the stars looked solemnly down at me in turn. When I finally caught my breath, I held my hand in front of my face. I saw no wrinkles, creases, or varicose veins—my hands looked perfectly fine, if a bit feminine for a guy my age. Then again, they’d always been that way.

“So then…nothing changed?”

I tried patting my face. I detected no wrinkles there either, nor even any patches of facial hair. It felt exactly the same as it had before I entered

the tunnel. *Oh, thank God,* I thought to myself as I let out a heavy sigh of relief. I hadn't aged one bit. Of course, I'd thought from the outset that the whole "instant aging" thing seemed a bit too ludicrous to be true, but boy, was I ever glad to be right.

I sat up and tried to wipe the dirt off my back. Now that I'd had a chance to calm down a bit, I couldn't believe how different the atmosphere inside the tunnel had felt compared to outside. It was almost like I'd just awoken from a very, very strange dream. Thinking about it rationally, it wouldn't have surprised me if that really had been a dream—because I mean, why the hell would there be a virtually infinite number of torii and torches deep in a random tunnel in the middle of nowhere? I would have dismissed the whole experience as a fever dream right then and there…if it weren't for the sandal poking out of my left-side pocket.

"Yeah, no. This really was hers… There's no getting around it."

The little red sandal I held in both hands was undeniable proof that what happened in there hadn't been a dream or a hallucination. Moreover, when I closed my eyes, I could vividly recall what Kee looked like, and the decaying texture of those torii, almost as if they were still right in front of me. There was no doubt in my mind that the tunnel I'd just exited was somehow connected to that bizarre, otherworldly space.

With all these remaining unanswered questions, I was feeling a little frazzled by the whole experience, though I was mostly grateful to have made it out in one piece. At the same time, another part of me was strangely entranced by the mysterious tunnel, compelled to uncover its true nature. That probably just meant I wasn't ready to give up on the (admittedly microscopic) possibility that if I followed it to the very end, I could see my little sister again. At present, I was too tired, and I needed to get home. Maybe I'd give it another shot after school the next day.

I crammed Karen's sandal into my pocket, then trudged up the stairs to the train tracks and stretched my weary legs for the long walk home.

When I made it to the house, I opened the front door quietly so as not to wake my father, then stepped into the entryway. Unfortunately, in the

process, I knocked over an umbrella leaning against the wall, which clattered loudly as it fell on the hardwood floor. I winced, then hurried to set it upright before attempting to dash up to my room—but then the hallway lights flickered on.

"Kaoru!" gasped my father, looking out from the doorway of the main bedroom.

Crap. He'd caught me red-handed in the act of being out past curfew without permission. I really wasn't in the mood for a lecture, so hopefully he'd make it quick. I hung my head low to give the illusion of remorse as my father dashed down the hall and grabbed me roughly by the shoulders. I closed my eyes, bracing for him to smack me upside the head. However, after several seconds, there came no punch to the gut, nor slap across the face. Cautiously, I reopened my eyes to see my father looking down at me as though he were about to cry. It was pretty unnerving, to be honest.

"Oh, Kaoru… Thank God…" my father said, wringing the words out like moisture from a damp dishrag.

Thank God for what?

"I don't know what I would've done if I were to lose you too… I'm sorry for my behavior earlier. I had a little too much to drink, that's all."

Aha. I see what's going on here. My father had gone into his famous post-hangover repentance mode and was desperately trying to atone for whatever aggressive actions he might have taken while under the influence. Whenever this happened, he always turned almost disgustingly nice and apologetic, so I quickly told him not to worry about it.

"I'm really sorry, son. I'll be sure to more carefully monitor my alcohol consumption going forward," he assured me—refusing to fully commit to going sober, as usual. "So please promise you won't run away from home again, okay?"

I nodded, though I found it a little ridiculous for him to imply that me being away from the house for a few hours was somehow "running away from home." It wasn't like this was the first time it had ever happened either.

“I mean it, son. I kept getting calls from the school, and I had no idea what to tell them… Where on earth did you go, anyhow?”

Calls from the school? The hell’s he talking about? I was extremely confused at this point, but I went ahead and answered his question regardless.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I went out for a little walk, that’s all.”

“…So you refuse to tell me, is that it? Then I suppose it must have been somewhere I wouldn’t approve of.”

“No, I’m dead serious. I just wanted to get some fresh air.”

“Be honest with me, son. Whose house were you staying at? Or did you run off into the city?”

“I wasn’t staying at anyone’s house. Heck, I didn’t even leave Kozaki…”

“Forget it,” my father said, his expression turning sour. “Just don’t let it happen again. If word got around town that you’d gone missing, there could’ve been serious repercussions. For both of us.”

My father proceeded to return to the bedroom, scratching the back of his head as he turned the lights off once more. *What the hell was* that *all about?* I had absolutely no idea, but I tried to shrug it off and decided to go take a shower to wash off all the sweat from my long night out.

Then my father said one last thing before closing the door, something that *really* threw me for a loop.

“Unbelievable… My own son, running off for an entire week to do God knows what… Where did I go wrong?”

He was muttering under his breath, though, so maybe I’d simply misheard him. In any event, I headed for the bathroom to take a nice, hot shower. Peering into the mirror at my reflection, I confirmed once more that I had indeed not aged a day. Relieved, I set my cell phone on the counter so I could take off my clothes. Then the screen flashed on, and I had to do a double take. It showed that I had dozens of missed calls—not just from my father but from Shohei as well. Underneath that was a wall of text messages.

“Son, where are you?”

“dude quit playin hooky”

“I expect you home by tomorrow. That’s an order.”

“brooo where the hell are you i’m bored out of my mind”

“At least reply to let me know you’re somewhere safe.”

“everyone’s gettin kinda worried about u bro… ok i lied. just me. but still!!”

What the hell was going on here? How could I possibly have gotten this many calls and texts while I was out walking and not heard a single one? It didn’t make any sense. For that matter…

Why was the date on my phone almost a full week off?

“What the…” I mumbled as I squinted and brought the phone up to my face. The screen clearly displayed the date as July 8th—yet it had been just before midnight on July 1st when I left the house to go for a walk, so it should only have been July 2nd.

“Is my phone glitching or what?”

I tried fiddling around with it a bit, but everything else seemed to be working fine—it was only the date that didn’t add up. All the missed calls and texts were from after July 2nd as well. All of a sudden, I felt a slight chill. I wasn’t really in the mood for a warm shower anymore, so I left the bathroom and headed into the living room, where I grabbed the remote off the table and turned on the TV. The screen flickered on right in the middle of the weather forecast. As the soft classical piano music drifted from the internal speakers, I read the text scrolling on the marquee at the bottom of the screen.

“LATER TODAY (7/8): 10-20% CHANCE OF RAIN”

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. Though at this point, it was less that I couldn’t believe my eyes and more that I wanted to

rule out every other possible explanation before fully accepting the impossible.

"No way. You've gotta be kidding me," I whispered under my breath in a futile attempt to shake off the anxiety. I turned off the TV and whipped out my phone to dial the only other person I could think to ask. After being sent to voice mail several times, he finally picked up on my tenth attempt.

"Yeah…?" said the gruff voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Kaga? Can I ask you something?"

"Dude, do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Yeah, so about that—could you tell me today's date?"

"Whaddaya mean? It's like, uh…the 8th, isn't it? Yeah, 4 a.m. on the 8th."

"Okay. And you're one hundred percent sure about that?"

"Yes. Dude. Also, why are you calling me about this? Why didn't you check the calendar on your own phone or—I dunno—do *literally anything* other than wake your best friend up at four in the morning on a school night? Speaking of which, when the hell are you gonna come back to __"

Before Shohei could finish that sentence, the call dropped. I looked down at my phone and learned why. My battery had died. Bad timing, to be sure, but at least I'd managed to get my main question answered. By all accounts, today really did seem to be July 8th.

"What the hell, man…"

I felt a headache coming on. This just wasn't possible; I'd only been out of the house for three hours, tops. I'd maybe have been willing to accept that I was off by an hour or two, but a *week*? I ran back into the bathroom and checked my face in the mirror again. My beard hadn't grown at all. I generally shaved it once every three days, so going without for an entire week would have been very noticeable. I didn't feel hungry either, despite not having eaten anything since I left the house a week ago—supposedly.

The same could be said for my phone. There was no way the battery could have lasted an entire week without needing to recharge, especially considering it had already been at ten percent when I walked into the tunnel. Yet it had still held enough charge for me to have a short phone call with Shohei. It wasn't as though cell phones consumed zero power when not actively in use either. The fact that it had automatically updated the date to July 8th the moment I left the tunnel and got service again was evidence enough of that.

"The tunnel… The Urashima Tunnel…"

It was the only explanation I could think of. All these bizarre phenomena had only begun to occur after I walked in there: finding Karen's sandal, bumping into our old dead parakeet, and now this inexplicable time jump. Just what in the world was happening to me? Was I suffering from some form of amnesia? Was this all just an illusion? Had someone brainwashed or hypnotized me? Try as I might to rack my brain for answers, the only things I managed to come up with were more questions, and a whole lot more anxiety.

"…I can't do this right now, man. I need to sleep."

My mind was in shambles. I needed to give it some rest before attempting to make more sense of this situation. Not to mention, I had to go to school in the morning… Or in a couple of hours, rather.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

Sweat and Hair Conditioner

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 2:
Sweat and Hair Conditioner

WHEN I WALKED into my classroom at Kozaki High the next morning, all eyes were on me—if only for a moment. Pretty much all of my classmates looked over at me as if to say "Whoa, he's back?" then returned to whatever it was they were doing. A few students *did* approach me to ask where I'd been.

"Yo, Kaoru! Where were you, man?"

"Almost thought you were gonna drop out for a minute there."

"What the heck were you even doing last week?"

I tried to play it off like I'd come down with a really bad case of the flu, an excuse they seemed to buy, given their jokey reaction ("Whuh-oh! Hope you're not still contagious!") and subsequent entire loss of all interest in me. Thus was balance restored to the universe as I returned to my natural state of being: just some random guy in class who no one ever paid any attention to.

I proceeded to sit at my desk, then pulled out my textbook and pencil case from my book bag. Suddenly, someone kicked my chair from the side.

"'Sup, dude," said Shohei in his standard unaffected tone.

"Hey, man. Nothin' much."

"So what the hell was that phone call about last night?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, sorry… Guess I was still kind of in zombie mode."

"Uh-huh. Ya don't say," he scoffed. "Anyway, were you seriously outta commission for an entire week because of some cold?"

No, I wasn't, actually. However, trying to explain what really happened would have been far more trouble than it was worth. I figured he wouldn't believe me anyhow. So, I decided to lean into the white lie I'd just come up with.

“Yeah, man. I’ve never been more sick in my life. Felt like I was on death’s doorstep.”

“Okay, *now* you’re screwin’ with me,” said Shohei, clearly starting to get a little annoyed. “You really expect me to believe you just got over a pneumonia-tier cold? Hell, you look fit as a freaking fiddle. And if you *were* really that sick, your dad should’ve called the school to let ’em know, right? There’s no excuse for being MIA that long.”

I froze up, not sure what to say when he’d so thoroughly debunked my alibi. The worst part was that he had a point too. I should have faked a cough to make it seem more believable, at the very least.

“So, do you wanna tell me what really happened or not?” Shohei demanded.

“Well, I guess you could say…I sort of ran away from home, in a sense? Then I totally lost track of time, and before I knew it, a whole week had gone by. I know, sounds crazy, right? I couldn’t believe it either. Heh heh heh.” I tried my best to laugh it off nonchalantly. But I could tell from Shohei’s glare that he saw right through that excuse too.

“Look, dude. You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to. But as your friend, the least you could do is text me back. Dumbass. Just don’t call me up at 4 a.m. again. I’m not gonna pick up next time.”

“Ha ha… Yeah, sorry about that.”

As much as I felt like an asshole for keeping Shohei at arm’s length, I had to admit that I really appreciated his tendency not to pry into my personal life. He was like the sort of friend you only started talking to because you randomly happened to get seated next to them in class, the one who you always went to first when the time came to pair up for group projects. Close, but not too close; we each respected the other’s privacy. Obviously, I didn’t know exactly how Shohei felt about it, but for me, this was the ideal level of intimacy for a friendship.

“Though it does make me kinda wonder, y’know?” I mused aloud.

“Huh? About what?” Shohei replied.

“Just about how time works in general. Like, would there ever be a situation in real life where several days could feel like only a few minutes? …Er, not that I’m trying to hint at anything here, for the record. Just a random thought I had.”

I tried to float the subject as casually as possible. I knew Shohei was actually a pretty astute and intelligent guy, so there was a good chance he might know of a potential explanation for this bizarre phenomenon, one that I’d never come up with on my own.

“Nah, man,” he replied, looking at me like I’d just said the dumbest thing in the world. “I mean, if it were a few hours and you were super engrossed in a book or something, maybe I could see it seeming like a few minutes, but a few *days*? There’s no way you’d be able to not notice that kind of time passing. I mean, your stomach would let you know for one thing, and you’d naturally get tired sooner or later and need to sleep.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense…”

“Though on the other hand,” he said, suddenly looking quite pensive, “there are definitely ways in which it can *feel* like time’s moving faster than it normally would. Like, if you’re focusing super hard on a given project for several days straight—though that’s more of a mental phenomenon than a physical one. I guess from a mythological standpoint, there’s always the concept of being ‘spirited away.’ You know—people disappearing and then coming back in circumstances that go unexplained and seem supernatural.”

“Hmmm…”

I had to admit, neither of those possibilities sounded especially plausible in this case. Sure, I’d been focusing pretty hard while in that tunnel, but not to the point that I’d miss a whole week. I supposed there was technically always a possibility that I’d been inexplicably “spirited away.” Though if that were the case, I felt like I’d never know how or why.

“Oh yeah, and then there’s also the whole concept of time dilation—or the ‘Urashima effect,’ as it’s more commonly known in Japan.”

Wait. Urashima? That was the last word I’d expected to come out of Shohei’s mouth. Obviously intrigued, I leaned forward in my seat. “Hang on. Could you tell me a little more about that?”

“Oh, it’s that thing you see in sci-fi novels from time to time. About how when you start traveling at nearly the speed of light, or your body gets subjected to immense gravitational forces, time kinda slows down—but only for you.”

“What do you mean, it ‘slows down’?”

“Like for you, it might only feel like a few minutes have passed, but in the outside world, it could have been several hours. Remember the Hyperbolic Time Chamber in *Dragon Ball*? It’s pretty much the exact opposite of that.”

Holy crap. He’d perfectly described the phenomenon I’d experienced the night before. I couldn’t speak to whether there were any light-speed or hypergravity shenanigans at work in the Urashima Tunnel, but if it had been named as such because it exhibited the Urashima effect, then everything made total sense. In which case, I *wasn’t* suffering from memory loss or hallucinations—the flow of time had simply slowed to a crawl while I was inside the tunnel. That also explained the lack of physical changes to my body.

“Uh, dude?” said Shohei. “Why’d you go quiet all of a sudden? You’re not about to tell me you were on some sort of light-speed interstellar flight last week, are you?”

“Nah, man. Of course not. It’s hard enough going into the city from our neck of the woods, let alone another solar system.”

“Ha! Now *there’s* the deadpan smartass I know and love!” Shohei said, punching me hard in the shoulder. It hurt pretty bad, but I decided to let it go as a show of gratitude for giving me a promising new lead in this mystery. “Anyway, dude, just so you know, some things around here kinda took a turn for the worse on account of you being away for so long.”

“Wait, really? You mean I’m not just a waste of space here after all?”

“…Dude, do you realize how pathetic that sounds?”

“No, I do.”

“Then don’t say it like that… Anyway, have a look,” Shohei said, pointing across the room with a jerk of his chin. He seemed to be directing

my attention to where the new girl, Anzu Hanashiro, sat alone at her desk, quietly reading her book as usual.

"…What about her?" I asked. "Oh, you mean that she's got her school uniform now?"

"No, dumbass. How would that be a change for the worse? Try looking a little lower."

"At what?" I asked, not seeing anything unusual at all about her skirt—but then I brought my gaze further down and grasped what Shohei was hinting at. She was wearing a pair of cheap rubber bathroom slippers, whereas the last time I'd seen her, she'd been wearing a nice pair of indoor shoes.

"It was Kawasaki's doing, in case you hadn't guessed," said Shohei.

"What happened?"

"Well, it all started when… Oh, hey. Speak of the devil herself."

Shohei gestured with his chin again—this time toward the door at the front of the room, right as Koharu walked into class. She proceeded to waltz right up to Anzu's desk with her posse of followers.

"Oh my *gosh*! Look at you! Why are you wearing those ratty old slippers in class?" Koharu teased with a knowing smirk. Anzu didn't even look up—which obviously was more than enough to piss off a short-tempered girl like Koharu. She scrunched up her face and clicked her tongue in disdain. "Oh yeah? You're gonna ignore me, huh? Fine, have it your way. I just came over here to let you know that I found your other shoes for you, but I guess you don't care!"

Koharu pulled a pair of indoor shoes out from behind her back. I immediately noticed that, for whatever reason, they were soaking wet. Koharu then pressed them down hard on Anzu's desk, sending water squeezing out across the surface with a loud *squish*.

"Looks like some big meanie tried to flush 'em down the toilet yesterday," Koharu went on. "Did you have to walk all the way home in those things yesterday? Ah ha ha! That's so cute. Anyway, try to be more

careful next time. Don’t make other people have to go fishing around in the toilet for you.”

Koharu wasn’t even trying to be subtle about it anymore—she was out for blood. Even the girls in her posse didn’t seem prepared for her to have gone *this* far; their sideline chatter was all muttered stuff like “Yikes” and “Holy crap.” I could see now what Shohei meant about things having taken a turn for the worse. It appeared that Anzu had somehow wound up the latest victim of Koharu’s relentless bullying streak.

That being said, however, I felt nothing from watching this exchange take place in front of me, presumably because I felt no strong emotions toward the new girl one way or the other. How could I, given that we still had yet to exchange a single word? As of that instant, it was no skin off my nose, so I honestly couldn’t have cared less.

It appeared I wasn’t the only one. Anzu herself didn’t seem the slightest bit bothered by any of Koharu’s provocations. She didn’t dignify this blatant affront with a reaction, just carried on leafing through her book, wholly unintimidated.

“See what I mean?” said Shohei, nudging me with his shoulder.

“New girl looks completely unfazed.”

“Yeah, she’s always like that. Won’t give Kawasaki the time of day.”

“Damn. That’s impressive.”

If nothing else, I had to respect the new girl for not taking any of Koharu’s crap. Most girls—hell, most boys, even—would have cracked by this point. Yet it was plain to see that Anzu wasn’t the one about to crack, as each time she refused to acknowledge her provocateur’s existence, Koharu became visibly more irritated.

“Hey. Don’t you have something to say to me?” Koharu demanded. “Not a word of thanks for the girl who saved your shoes? You think you can keep quiet and it’ll all be over soon, is that it? Keep it up, and I’ll go tell some of my senior guy friends how much you’ve been getting on my nerves lately. And they’re not as gentle as I am, FYI. So don’t come crying to me if you get jumped on your way home.”

A pause. Then, without a word, Anzu turned to the next page in her book.

“God, you’re pissing me off! Just say something already!” Koharu snapped.

I couldn’t believe how much she was letting Anzu get under her skin. Normally, bullies lose interest in tormenting someone when they fail to get a rise out of them after a number of attempts, but for whatever reason, Koharu seemed intent on pursuing this particular vendetta. Though perhaps she’d finally grown bored with it, because almost the second after blowing her lid, she shrugged the whole thing off with a “Fine, whatever” and turned to head back to her own desk.

Just when I thought the dust had finally settled, the new girl finally opened her mouth for the first time.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” said Anzu, her tone like that of a scolding parent—an equal mixture of frustration and disappointment.

The class erupted with scandalized murmurs.

“Whoa, what the hell?” Shohei gasped.

“Finally gonna give her a piece of your mind, eh?” hooted one of our classmates.

“Give it to her, new kid!” hollered another.

I hadn’t been around for the past week, obviously, but I could tell from the tension in the air that Anzu deigning to *speak* to Koharu was an extremely rare occurrence. The entire class was on tenterhooks as they prayed this would be the day someone finally put the queen bee in her place.

“Oh yeah?” Koharu whirled around. “You got somethin’ to say, huh? Well, for your sake, I sure hope it’s an apology.”

There was a ferocious glint in her eyes as she and Anzu finally locked gazes with one another. Undeterred, the new girl rose fearlessly from her seat to face her bully.

“Sorry, Kawasaki, was it?” she began. “Just curious, is this actually fun for you, or do you really not have anything better to do?”

“Huh? Is *what* actually fun for me? Surely you’re not implying that *I* was the one who took your shoes yesterday, are you?”

“I mean all the petty harassment in general. Hiding my textbooks, scrawling rude words all over my desk, spraying me with the bathroom hose—do you actually enjoy any of it?”

“Wow, sounds like someone’s a little paranoid. I mean, it’s not like it was *me* doing *all* of those things.”

“Let me ask a different question, then. Is your moral barometer utterly broken, or did you never have one in the first place?”

“Don’t know what that word means, sorry. How ’bout you start speaking in a language I can understand, you antisocial freak?”

“Fine. Have it your way. I’ll punch you and get it over with, then. Ready?”

“Uh, excuse me? You wanna go, you little b—”

WHAM.

Before Koharu could finish her sentence, Anzu proceeded to sock her right in the nose with no hesitation whatsoever. The whole class went instantly, deathly silent. Even I was at a loss for words; a punch in the shoulder or the gut I could have understood, but straight in the middle of the face? Even if it looked like Anzu hadn’t really put her back into it, that still *had* to have hurt like hell. Indeed, Koharu let out a near inaudible high-pitched squeal as the force from the punch caused her to fall backward onto her ass. A moment later, trails of blood began to trickle from both her nostrils. It seemed Koharu herself hadn’t fully registered what had occurred, as she just kind of sat there, making no attempts to stand or wipe the blood from her nose.

“Oh, sorry about that. Wasn’t expecting to actually draw blood. But hey, I guess we can call it even now,” Anzu said matter-of-factly. Then she sat down, moved her wet shoes off the desk, and went back to reading her book.

No one moved a muscle. I assumed they were waiting to see how Koharu would respond. Would she fire back or would she flounder? Fight or flight? This was the first time her position as queen bee of the class had ever been put to the test. However, in the end…

“Hic!”

She chose flight. Everyone watched as she scurried out of the classroom, tears streaming down her cheeks. Perhaps the greatest indicator of her defeat, though, was that her usual overconfident posture had crumbled into a hunched-over slouch that looked so pathetic, even her usual retinue of yes-girls looked on with disgust. Koharu’s reign of terror was officially over, as far as I was concerned. Barring a major comeback arc, there would be no recovering from this crushing defeat.

“Heh. Crybaby,” Anzu snickered to herself.

It was the first time I’d ever seen her smile.

“Man, what a day, right?” said Shohei as he sat in front of me during lunch hour, munching away at his yakisoba sandwich.

Koharu still hadn’t come back to class, and the day was halfway over. To be honest, I couldn’t blame her. No way would an arrogant girl like her be able to handle that kind of humiliation. Even if she did come back and try to play it cool, the image of her sniveling on the ground would remain burned into our memories for all eternity. Hell, it wouldn’t have surprised me to see the tables turn and for *her* to become the new punching bag for the school bullies. Who knew, maybe she wouldn’t ever show her face at school again. I could tell that a majority of my classmates were overjoyed to finally see Koharu get her comeuppance, but personally, I couldn’t help feeling an itty bit bad for her.

“Feel like she didn’t have to punch her in the *nose*, though, man,” I mused between sips of my coffee-flavored milk drink. My lunch for the day was a humble hunk of raisin bread.

“Eh, she can take it. Not like it broke any bones. Even if that *was* a lot of blood.”

“Yeah, but you can’t just punch a girl in the face…”

“Hard disagree. When it’s girl-on-girl, that’s totally fair play.”

“I really don’t think that makes it okay, man.”

“Nah, dude. It’s her own fault for egging the new girl on for so long.”

“I just feel like there was a more civil way of handling it. That’s all.”

Shohei frowned grumpily. “What the hell, man? Why you gotta be so contrarian? You’re not seriously trying to take Kawasaki’s side here, are you? After how crappy she’s treated you?”

“Nah, man. It’s not like that. Though I guess it could be a slight case of that, uh… What’s it called again? Holstein syndrome?”

“Stockholm syndrome. Holsteins are a type of cow, my friend.”

Right, that’s what I was thinking of. I knew there was a “hol” in there somewhere.

Sensing a break in the conversation, I took my eyes off Shohei for a moment and scanned the classroom. Virtually all of our classmates were engaged in lively small talk as they ate lunch with their friends, including the girls who’d once been part of Koharu’s posse. If anything, they actually seemed to be laughing and enjoying themselves *more* than when their ringleader had been around. Almost like her absence didn’t make any difference to them whatsoever. Thus again, while I wasn’t a diehard Koharu sympathizer by any means, I did have to feel the slightest bit bad for her.

Then, all of a sudden, the door to the classroom swung open with a loud crash, and everyone turned to look. It was Koharu, accompanied by a thuggish male student who looked like nothing but trouble. He had dyed blond hair, a silver necklace with a crucifix, and he wore his baggy pants so low that the cuffs were thoroughly shredded from being repeatedly stepped on. He had a pretty slender physique, but he still looked like the type of guy you wouldn’t want to mess with. I did recognize him from somewhere, though—if memory served, this was the same senior delinquent who Koharu was allegedly dating. He scrunched his almost-nonexistent shaved eyebrows together as he scanned the classroom with an icy glare before finally stating his business.

“Lookin’ for a girl named Hanashiro. She in here?”

The cheery vibe in the room instantly froze over. Everyone had heard the rumors of Koharu’s boyfriend being a notorious punk who was always looking for a fistfight. As such, more than half of my classmates simply looked down at their desks, praying that as long as they stayed out of it, they wouldn’t get caught in the crosshairs. That was my plan too, of course. Unfortunately, the senior punk and I made eye contact before I had the chance to look away.

“Hey, you,” he said. “Which one of these chicks is Hanashiro?”

I knew he wasn’t gonna buy me playing dumb for a minute, so I fessed up and pointed out where the new girl was sitting with my eyes. She was, at present, taking a large bite of her sandwich as if nothing was going on. The way she chewed it loudly despite the obvious air of tension in the classroom told me she was doing this on purpose. Once the senior guy picked her out from the crowd, he barged into the classroom and walked right over to her. Koharu, meanwhile, was being surprisingly docile throughout this whole exchange. Usually, having her tough-looking guy friends to back her up only emboldened her to act like even more of an irreverent big shot, but for the time being, she was scuttling after him in silence like a child hiding behind her mother’s skirt.

“You’re Hanashiro?” the guy asked as he stopped in front of her desk.

“Yes, and?” Anzu set her half-eaten sandwich on the table, not the smallest hint of fear in her eyes. “Can I help you with something?”

“Got somethin’ I need to talk to you about. C’mere for a sec.”

“I’m eating right now.”

Abruptly, the senior thug kicked Anzu’s desk as hard as he could, knocking it over onto the ground with such force that it sent her sandwich and milk tea flying through the air from the momentum. It was so sudden and needlessly violent that a few of the girls in class shrieked.

“Last chance,” said the punk. “You comin’ or not?”

“…If you insist,” Anzu replied after a short pause, her expression blank.

“Good. Follow me,” he ordered, then walked back out of the classroom with Anzu in tow. He turned and gave a warning to the rest of us before slamming the door: “Any of you go snitching about this, you’re dead meat.”

There was silence for a moment. Then the murmurs started right back up again.

“Whoa, is she gonna be okay?”

“She’s so dead, dude. Someone should call the teacher.”

“Wait, so those two *are* dating after all?”

“That’s what she gets for challenging Kawasaki, I guess…”

From the sound of it, there were an awful lot of people worried about Anzu, but after the senior guy’s little parting threat, none of them were brave enough to actually go tell a faculty member. Myself included.

“Yikes, man,” I casually remarked to Shohei as I resumed eating my lunch. “If that were me, I’d break down and start begging for my life at that point.”

“Uh, dude? Shouldn’t you be going after her?” he replied, his expression stern.

“Huh? To do what?”

“Gee, I dunno… Rescue her, maybe?”

His oddly expectant tone was really throwing me for a loop.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why should that be *my* job?”

“Because it’s kinda your fault that Kawasaki dug her hooks into the new girl, duh. Didn’t we just go over this?”

“Pretty sure we didn’t. But go ahead and run it by me one more time.”

“I mean, think about it. Usually, Kawasaki bosses *you* around when she gets angry, and that helps her blow off some steam. But since you were gone all week, she’s been forced to take her anger out on the new girl instead.”

“And that’s my fault how, exactly? Don’t pin the blame on the victim, sheesh.”

“Fine. You’re still complicit in this for pointing that dude to where she was sitting.”

He kind of had a point there. I faltered a moment. “…Man, stop making it sound like I’m the villain here. I couldn’t help it. You would’ve done the same thing in my shoes.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Shohei rose from his seat.

“Wait, are you going after her?”

“Well, yeah. You expect me to stand by and let her get her ass kicked?”

“Wow, Kaga. Never knew you were so cool,” I teased. “If this were an anime, you’d be the main character for sure.”

“Yeah, and you’d be a faceless background character they only drew in to fill space.”

Ouch. I had to admit, that one stung a little bit. He wasn’t wrong either—all I’d done was lead the villain straight to Anzu’s desk, then try to act like I had nothing to do with it. Hell, calling me a faceless background character was honestly pretty generous, considering he could’ve easily gotten away with calling me the annoying little traitor that everyone hates.

“So are you coming or what? Not gonna force you to, but here’s your invite.”

I was conflicted. Was I going to own up to my cowardice and stay here in the name of self-preservation, or go try to help the new girl and reclaim my lost dignity? I went back and forth for a bit, but eventually, the scales tipped ever so slightly in favor of the latter.

“All right, fiiine. I’ll tag along,” I reluctantly agreed, feeling more than a little peer pressured. Although I *was* pretty worried about the new girl. I knew I would have a hard time sleeping if I found out she got beaten to a bloody pulp due (at least in small part) to my own inaction. “But no heroics, all right? If it gets dicey out there, we need to go find an adult.”

“Sounds fair to me. C’mon, let’s go.”

I shoved the remainder of the half-eaten raisin bread in my mouth and ran out the classroom door after Shohei.

There was only one place ne’er-do-wells in school were likely to do their dirty work: behind the gymnasium—at least according to every manga I’d ever read. It was a trope for good reason, though, as that was the most wide-open space on campus that was also hidden from prying eyes. As such, Shohei and I decided to check there before anywhere else. Lo and behold, my intuition was correct.

“You know why I called you out here, right?” the senior punk asked like an interrogator, backing Anzu against the wall. I was relieved to see we’d arrived before it actually came to blows. Shohei and I remained hidden for the time being, peeking out from the corner of the gymnasium building to watch the drama unfold.

“Nope. Can’t say I do,” Anzu replied.

“Playin’ dumb, eh? ’Cause Koharu tells me you slugged her in the nose.”

Hearing Koharu’s given name said aloud in this context was decidedly weird. It occurred to me that it really wasn’t the kind of name you associated with a queen bee.

“Oh, no. I definitely did that. Though to be fair, I *did* warn her beforehand. Even asked if she was ready for it.”

“Wow, so you think it’s okay to sock people in the nose as long as you give ’em a heads-up first? That sure is some head-ass logic you got there. Guess you won’t mind if I do the same thing to you, then?” The guy brought his face closer to Anzu’s with a twisted smirk. It was enough to make me nervous myself.

Yet Anzu seemed entirely unfazed. “By all means, feel free. Just don’t expect me not to fight back.”

Her tone was fearless and assured. Almost a little *too* fearless, if you asked me. This guy definitely wasn’t the type who’d hesitate to hit a girl. I

whispered to Shohei that it was about time we went to call for a teacher, and he nodded in agreement. However, as we were about to turn and run to the faculty room, things got *really* real.

"Whoa!"

Without a hint of warning, Anzu took a swing at the thug's face, just like she'd done to Koharu earlier, catching him completely off guard. Even so, either due to her punch not being fast enough or the guy having insanely good reflexes, he somehow managed to catch her fist before it hit its mark.

"The *hell* do you think you're doin'?!" he shouted, backhanding her clean across the cheek so hard that the sound echoed across campus. A small trail of blood ran down from the corner of Anzu's mouth. Things had officially gotten violent. There was no time to waste—we needed to go find a teacher ASAP.

Wait, but what if it's too late by the time we get back? Maybe it made more sense for the two of us to jump in and help right away. As intimidating as this guy was, we'd at least have a numbers advantage over him. Not that this guaranteed we wouldn't get our asses beat, mind you…

As we stood there waffling, he was literally kicking Anzu while she was down. She was on her knees, grunting in pain as he slammed the pointed tip of his shoe repeatedly into her gut.

"H-hey, knock it off! That's too far!" Koharu shouted frantically from the sidelines. She'd certainly chosen a convenient time to get sympathetic. She was right, though. This was going way too far. There was no time for hesitation anymore; I needed to muster up what little courage I could find, dive in there, and do whatever I could to break up the fight.

Right as I was about to do that, Shohei shouted out from behind me.

"Uh-oh, guys! Teacher's coming!"

I balked and looked around. However, I didn't see any teachers.

"Wait, what teacher?" I whispered to him.

"Don't worry about it, dude. It's a bluff," he whispered back.

Ohhhh. Now I got it. As far as scare tactics went, it was an oldie but goodie.

Sure enough, the senior punk instantly started looking around nervously upon hearing the word “teacher.” No matter how much of a badass he was, no one in their right mind would want to be caught beating up an underclassman, let alone a girl. Though I figured for him, it was less about it going on his permanent record and more about saving face in front of his cronies. As he scanned the vicinity, he eventually made eye contact with me, and he gave me a sour look as though he’d swallowed a fly.

“Dammit. That kid must’ve ratted us out… Well, whatever. Consider this a warning, new kid. Next time you pull that crap, I’ll send you straight to the emergency room,” he said, then swiftly turned to run away.

Anzu wasn’t about to let him off that easily.

“Oh, no you don’t.” She tackled him from behind, her arms wrapped around his waist. This caused the bully to fall forward like a toppled building, and he growled in pain as his face hit the hard earth. Anzu crawled on top of him and straddled his back with such feral, rabid motions that her skirt flipped up, and for a moment, I could see her panties—though it was pretty hard to care about that when she was battered, bruised, and exhibiting the kind of fathomless malice you might expect from a vengeful spirit in a horror movie. She pulled a ballpoint pen out from her chest pocket, raised it over her head, and then brought it down, driving it like a stake into her assailant’s temple.

“Gyaaagh!” he wailed in agony.

I couldn’t imagine she’d broken through bone or anything, but it still had hurt like hell. She continued stabbing him with the pen, driving its sharp point relentlessly into his arms, face, and back over and over. At first, he struggled desperately to wriggle out from underneath her, but then realizing there was no escape, he apparently decided his best option was to simply cover his face with his arms and wait for the onslaught to end. It seemed he’d wholly lost his nerve to fight back, as he kept whimpering pathetic apologies in a vain attempt to plead for mercy. I had no idea how

long she intended to keep this up; all I could do was watch with my mouth hanging open as she exacted her revenge.

“Hey! C’mon, that’s enough! Cut it out!” yelled Shohei, snapping me back to my senses. He was right. We couldn’t just stand here and let this continue.

The two of us ran over to break up the fight, but apparently Anzu misinterpreted that as us being on the bully’s side, and she started brandishing her weapon at Shohei instead, swinging it wildly through the air so that he couldn’t get close. While she was distracted by him, I found an opening to close in from behind and pinned her arms behind her back. Pulling her up by the armpits, I dragged her a safe distance away from the upperclassman. With her head close to mine, the smell of sweat and hair conditioner filled my nostrils. I couldn’t believe how light she was, nor how dainty. Who would have thought that this borderline-frail girl could have taken on both the queen bee of our class *and* the biggest thug in school and come out on top? These were strange times we lived in, to be sure.

“Let go of me!” Anzu thrashed, but I had her pinned in such a way that she posed no real danger to me, purely due to the gap in physical strength.

“J-just calm down, all right?! It’s over,” I said, trying to quell the raging storm inside her.

I yanked her around, twisting my torso so that we were both facing in the bully’s direction. He was hobbling off toward the school’s main gate like a wasted drunkard. The most intimidating delinquent in school was fleeing from campus with his tail between his legs. Seeing this, Anzu’s fight-or-flight response finally switched off.

“You promise to chill out now?” I asked.

“…Let me go,” she muttered.

I quickly did as I was told. The first thing Anzu did after finally regaining control of her limbs was brush her bangs aside to wipe the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand. As she dragged her wrist horizontally, it left a streaky trail of crimson across her cheek. I had to

admit, it made for a pretty mesmerizing image, almost like it had jumped straight off of a movie poster.

"What?" she demanded, glaring at me.

Whoops. I'd clearly let myself stare a little too long. I sure as hell wasn't about to say "Oh, I was mesmerized by the sight of you" like a creep, so I quickly hashed together another feasible explanation. "Oh, sorry. I was thinking 'Damn, that looks like it must've hurt.' That's all."

I pointed to the swollen, bright-red cheek where the punk had slapped her. To be sure, even if this was a spur of the moment excuse I'd pulled out of my ass, on closer inspection, it really *did* look like it hurt a ton.

"You might wanna go to the nurse's office," I suggested.

"That was already the plan, but thanks for your permission. Now leave me alone."

Almost immediately after turning to walk away, though, she started stumbling pretty badly. Thinking she must still be dizzy from the impact to her skull, I hurried over to help her stay upright, but she slapped my hand away. The message was clear: "Get lost." Even so, I didn't want to find out later that she'd collapsed on her way there, so I decided to follow after her at a safe distance. Neither Shohei nor Koharu had suffered any injuries, so I figured it was probably fine to leave them behind as I traced Anzu's steps into the school building. There was something a little eerie about walking down the empty hallway together, just the two of us, while maintaining a wide gap between.

"Did you get in a lot of fights like this at your old school too?" I asked, my eyes fixed on the small of her back, where her sweat-drenched uniform clung to her skin.

"So what if I did?" she answered tersely, not turning around to face me.

"I mean, maybe it's none of my business, but I feel like it's not the best idea for a girl your age to go around picking fights."

"You know, as much as I appreciate all the unsolicited advice, I think I can take care of myself, thanks."

“Sure, maybe *you* feel that way. But I guarantee you’re only gonna make other people worry about you when you come home with massive welts on your face.”

“Yeah? Who am I gonna worry?”

“Uh… Maybe your parents? Duh.”

“I don’t have any parents,” she stated bluntly.

Perhaps it was due to how candidly she admitted this that I made the following slip of the tongue:

“Wow. Lucky you.”

Anzu stopped dead in her tricks, and abruptly I realized my mistake. That was *not* the proper way to respond to someone who’d just revealed they were parentless. If anything, it was about the most inconsiderate thing I possibly could have said. Virtually any compassionate human being would know that the only correct response to finding out someone’s parents had either died or abandoned them was “Oh God, I’m so sorry”—and I’d pretty much said the exact opposite.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean, exactly?” Anzu turned around to face me. Her expression seemed to say that she hadn’t yet fully decided whether to be shocked or offended. There *was* a piercing look in her eyes that told me she wasn’t about to accept anything less than a convincing explanation as to why I felt that way. It seemed I might have stepped on a pretty big land mine. Hell, if my answer wasn’t to her liking, I worried she might come at *me* with that ballpoint pen of hers. I panicked, almost certain of my impending doom.

But what could I do? Maybe it still wasn’t too late to apologize and take it back? However, that would mean admitting I’d said something extremely messed up, and she might interpret that as me having initially said it sarcastically as a direct insult. I didn’t want that. So maybe the best option really was to just unload all of my dysfunctional family-related baggage on her and explain why I would ever think not having parents was something to be desired. In that case, where would I even start? From my father being a hopeless drunk? From my mother abandoning us? From when Karen—

Before I could finish that thought, the warning bell for fifth period rang.

“Oh, shoot! I forgot our next class is in the science room! I’d better haul ass and grab my stuff if I wanna make it there on time! I’ll catch up with you later; you take it easy in the nurse’s office, okay? See ya!” I yelled before dashing off, my tone far more chipper than usual. As I rounded the corner, I thought I heard her calling after me to say something, but I pretended not to notice.

I slid into the science room seconds before I would have been marked late. Once class began and the teacher started taking attendance, I realized that not only Anzu was missing, but Koharu was as well. I figured she’d gone home in shame after that whole debacle, and when I asked Shohei about it after class, he confirmed that to be the case.

“Yeah, she seemed like she was pretty done with the whole beef, dude,” he recounted.

“Seriously? This is the same Kawasaki we’re talking about?”

“Yep. She just kinda slouched over, lookin’ kinda like a deflated balloon, and then wobbled her way off campus.”

“Uh-oh… You don’t think that’s a warning sign, do you? Maybe we should call the suicide prevention hotline, just to be safe?”

“Dude, seriously, stop with the morbid stuff… Pretty sure she’s not gonna kill herself over something, bro. Anyway, how’d things go with the new girl on your end? Anything spicy happen?”

“Nah, not really. I kinda followed her awkwardly down the hall and then had to book it to class.”

“What, that’s it? Bor-riiing.”

I didn’t know what he’d been expecting, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. In any event, it wasn’t long before sixth period began, with both girls still absent, though the teacher did at least explain that Anzu was taking the rest of the day off because she wasn’t feeling well. However, since her book bag was still lying at the foot of her desk, I could only assume she was still

in the nurse's office and hadn't yet gone home. I tried to imagine the look of shock on the poor nurse's face when she walked into the room; anyone with half a brain would immediately assume there'd been a physical altercation. As the last period of the day dragged on, I sat and wondered what kind of excuse Anzu might have cooked up.

As soon as the final bell rang, I was the first one out the door. As I made my way back from campus, I went straight past the station where I would normally catch the train and instead continued walking right alongside the tracks. When I reached the point where the tracks entered the tunnel, I looked around to make sure no trains were coming (and that nobody in the vicinity was watching), then climbed over the chain link fence. Its metal wiring jangled loudly as I hopped down the other side and onto the tracks themselves. From there, I jogged through the tunnel, then took a sharp turn into the seaward ditch where the wooden staircase was hidden.

There it was, waiting for me: the Urashima Tunnel.

I'd come back to do a little independent research. I was now all but convinced that this was indeed the Urashima Tunnel, but at the same time, there were several ways in which it differed quite drastically from the urban legend I'd originally overheard. For one thing, it didn't instantly age you; in a way, it was more like it aged everyone else *except* you, since time passed much more slowly for the person inside. The bit about it having the ability to grant any wish also remained to be seen—though it certainly didn't seem to be as simple as walking in, then walking back out. That being said, I harbored no delusions that a high school kid like me could ever understand how the tunnel actually worked from a scientific perspective. Nevertheless, there had to be some rhyme or reason to it, so as long as I figured out the basic rules, I should be able to venture safely into its depths, where maybe—just maybe—I'd find Karen.

Hence why I'd decided to investigate. My goal for the day was to figure out exactly how the flow of time differed inside the tunnel. The night before, I had been in there for what felt like only a few minutes, but in actuality, a whole week had passed. So for starters, I wanted to know

exactly how long one minute of tunnel time was in real-world time. Otherwise, I might accidentally spend way too much time in there and end up like Urashima Taro.

Say I skipped five years in there, for example. Sure, my body would still be seventeen, but legally, I'd be twenty-two. Society at large would have progressed five years without me. That might be fine if I were a feral child living in the mountains somewhere, but in today's modern society, that wasn't the sort of time you could afford to lose by accident. Time once lost could never be reclaimed, after all; that was exactly why I needed to tread carefully. Dropping my stuff on the ground, I set my cell phone on top of my book bag. Then, after some light stretches, I headed inside the tunnel.

The first order of business was to figure out the exact cutoff point where the flow of time began to warp. My plan was to keep going in and out of the tunnel, gradually increasing how deep I went each time, then checking to see when the time on my cell phone outside started to advance at a much quicker rate. At that point, I'd know I'd found the approximate location of the cutoff. I couldn't help but feel like there had to be a more efficient way to figure this out, but I sure couldn't think of one, so I figured it wasn't worth fretting over. Once I'd repeated the process a few times, I became a little nostalgic for those old back-and-forth pacer tests we had to run in elementary school gym class. After about thirty runs, however, I was officially beat.

"Ugh… This is brutal…"

It was cooler inside the tunnel than outside but still swelteringly hot. I was already covered from head to toe in sweat. There *had* to be a better way of doing this. Finally, I grew fed up with only doing tiny incremental advances and decided to run all the way up to where the torii gates began. I didn't have to know where exactly the boundary was—just having an approximate idea was good enough for now. Even if I was ten or twenty meters off, it really wasn't a huge deal in the grand scheme of things. So, with renewed optimism, I ran back into the tunnel, stopping only when I was right before the off-white torii.

I gulped. Perhaps a small part of me had still been holding out hope that the bizarre experience I'd had the night before was nothing more than a

fever dream. Looking up at them again like this only made the harrowing reality of it set in all the more, and I became pretty overwhelmed. The whole place really was quite unsettling. It wasn't just the torii (which looked like they could have been made from the bones of some Jurassic beast) but also the torches on the wall, still burning as eerily as they had been the night prior. I had no clue whether they'd been burning all night or if someone had come to reignite them at some point in between.

"All right, based on vibes alone, it'd make sense for the first torii to be the cutoff point… Let's see if I'm right."

All I had to do was walk through, then come back out. I decided to go all the way to the third torii, though, just to remove any room for doubt. As soon as I got there, I did a right about-face, and my breath caught in my throat.

A person was standing there, directly in front of me. After the initial shock wore off, however, my brain quickly registered who it was: Anzu Hanashiro, the new girl.

She simply stood there, arms crossed, book bag slung over her shoulder, staring at me in blank confusion. A large wad of gauze was taped to where she'd been bleeding from the corner of her mouth earlier. She didn't say a word, and neither did I, maybe because part of me was convinced she was an illusion. After all, what in the world would *she* be doing here? Yet there she was, standing within arm's reach, having also passed through the first two torii. If she'd been following me this whole time, though, you'd think I would have noticed much sooner. Then again, if this was an illusion conjured up by the tunnel, why in the world had it chosen this girl with whom I'd spoken for the first time just hours ago? Hell, it had even put a bandage over the same cheek that had been slapped earlier—a shockingly specific detail to include.

"Hey," said the illusion. "What is this place?"

"D-don't ask me…"

Sure, I could have said it was the Urashima Tunnel, or that I was currently in the process of trying to figure that out for myself—but what

was the point of telling an illusion anything? It seemed like a waste of time, and I really couldn't afford to…

Wait. Oh, goddammit! Why had I let myself get distracted like this? This was no time to be speaking at phantoms.

"I… I've gotta get outta here!"

"How come?"

"Don't worry about it! Just c'mon!" I yelled, making a break for the exit. For all I knew, several hours or days could have passed. Sure enough, when I finally made it back outside, I found that the bright clear skies overhead were the color of navy-blue ink. I rushed over to check the time on my phone and saw that it was three hours since I had last entered the tunnel. Time had officially skipped forward once more.

"Um, you're hurting my hand," said a voice.

"Huh?"

I whirled back around and was flabbergasted to find that the illusory version of Anzu Hanashiro had somehow followed me back out of the tunnel. Then I looked down and saw that indeed, I had her hand in a vice grip tight enough to rip it clean off.

"Whoa! Sorry!" I yelped, pulling my hand away so fast you'd think I'd accidentally touched a hot grill. I must have grabbed her by the hand on my way out without even realizing it. Then I had another belated realization: her hand had been warm and soft to the touch, which meant this could only be the real-life Anzu—not a specter or an illusion. For a moment, I winced, half expecting her to hit me for daring to lay a hand on her, yet she seemed surprisingly chill about the whole thing. Though there *was* a glint of skepticism in her eyes.

"Tono-kun," she said abruptly, and I nearly jumped out of my shoes. I had no idea she even knew my name. "What just happened?"

She pointed at the single star that adorned the evening sky, having arrived unfashionably early for the night's festivities. Obviously, she was referring to the clear and inexplicable time disparity. Did I have no choice but to explain? Because I really didn't want to, if I could avoid it. Like,

what if I told her about its supernatural properties and she insisted on reporting the tunnel to the authorities so they could have actual scientists look into it? They'd probably block the place off to normal folks like me, and I couldn't risk that. It would mean giving up my only chance to ever bring Karen back.

Yet something told me that trying to deceive her would be an uphill battle as well. Obviously, she wasn't going to buy me pretending not to know anything, given how frantic I had been to get out of there, and I couldn't think of any reasonable excuses. I suspected she wouldn't fall for something half-assed like "Oh, didn't you know? The sun sets much earlier out here in the countryside. Also it only takes like a minute." I certainly didn't want to make her *more* suspicious of me by trying to cover it up and failing.

All this time, she was still waiting, waiting patiently and silently for me to answer her question. So in the end…I decided to come clean. For whatever reason, my intuition was that the chances of her going around and telling people about this were pretty slim. She seemed less like the type to cut open the goose that lays the golden egg and more the type to keep it all to herself…or at least, that's what I tried to tell myself as I began to give her the very, very long-winded explanation as to how I'd found this place and what I knew thus far.

"Hm. Interesting."

This was her only response after I finally finished speaking. Maybe it was just me, but I thought I detected the faintest hint of amusement in her voice. I couldn't believe how utterly unfazed she seemed by all this paranormal talk—though I supposed after the pen-stabbing incident earlier, I should have known better than to make assumptions about this girl's sense of what was normal and what wasn't.

"So you know the risks, but you're still determined to explore it. Why is that, exactly?" she asked. Her tone was genuinely curious. It seemed now that we'd exchanged more than a few words—even if it was really a one-sided explanation on my part—she was more ready to open up and converse

with me. Or at the very least, I no longer felt like I needed to watch my every word for fear that she might punch me in the nose.

“I mean, no special reason. There’s a wish I need granted, no matter the cost.”

“And what’s that?”

“I need money,” I lied, seeing no need to tell her the actual reason. “Wanna buy myself a motorcycle, a nice guitar… All sorts of stuff.”

“Liar,” she instantly clapped back.

How did she know? Too predictable? Man, Kaga saw right through my fake alibi this morning too… Maybe I’m not a very good liar in general.

“You don’t strike me as the type of guy who’d be into stuff like that,” she added.

“It’s not nice to judge people based on appearances, y’know.”

“Come on,” she pressed. “What are you *really* after?”

Her eyes were dogged and discerning. I didn’t know why she was being so persistent about this—it was a complete one-eighty from the aloof persona she maintained at school. For that matter, I still wanted to know what the hell *she* was doing here, even if now probably wasn’t the best time to ask. This wasn’t the sort of place you could just wind up by pure coincidence, so the obvious conclusion was that she’d followed me—but for what purpose? Did she have something she needed to tell me? Something so important that she hopped a chain-link fence and followed me down the tracks into a mysterious tunnel rather than simply waiting until the next day? What could it possibly be, in that case? And why wouldn’t she have called out to me to get my attention sooner? None of it made any sense, and I was getting tired of thinking about it.

Maybe I should tell her the truth and divulge exactly why it is I’m investigating the Urashima Tunnel. I’ll unload all my dirty laundry, and she’ll be so put off and speechless that she’ll run for the hills and never want anything to do with me again. Then I can have the privacy I need to conduct my investigation in peace. What could go wrong?

“All right, all right. I’ll tell you,” I said, taking a deep breath before I began. “So yeah, you’re basically right. I’m not here looking for money, or anything. My real wish isn’t even a thing, actually—it’s a little sister. That’s what I’ve always wanted… Er, wait—that came out wrong. It’s not that I’m wishing *for* a cute little sister or anything weird like that—I already have one… Or I guess ‘I *had* one’ would be more accurate. Her name was Karen, and while she could definitely be a real terror sometimes, she was a total sweetheart. Like, you wouldn’t believe how adorable she was. She and I used to go out playing together each and every day, and I can’t think of a single time we ever seriously fought over anything. Then five years ago, she died after falling out of a tall tree I helped her climb, and it was pretty much all my fault. And that, along with how shaken up we were by her sudden death, kinda tore our entire family apart, because she was definitely the favorite child—and the glue that kept my mother and father together, for reasons I won’t get into, though to be clear, I think the fallout was kind of inevitable; we were a pretty dysfunctional family from the get-go; anyway, Karen’s death hit me really, really hard, to the point that I still don’t feel like I’m really ‘over it’ to this day, or rather, I haven’t fully come to terms with it; like, yeah, I know she’s ‘dead,’ but for whatever reason I can’t connect the dots between ‘dead’ and ‘never coming back’ in my brain—like I’m still holding hope that she might come barging back in through the front door someday with a great big smile on her face, or something, though obviously, I’m not that stupid; logically, I know better than to think there’s any chance of her ever coming back—hell, we’ve got her ashes on our countertop, and I was there for her cremation, and I literally helped transfer her bones to the urn myself, but for whatever reason, my mind keeps playing these stupid tricks on me, holding out hope even though I know it’s impossible, and it’s just really, really hard, and… Well, you get the idea. So yeah. That’s why I’m trying to explore the Urashima Tunnel. Because I want my little sister back—that’s what I’m really after. Go ahead and call me crazy, but it’s the truth.”

Phew. That must have been the hardest I’d worked my vocal cords in years. It was just, once I started talking about Karen, the words came tumbling out of my mouth, regardless of my volition. Maybe somewhere deep in my subconscious, a part of me had been waiting for a chance to

vent to someone about all these emotions I'd bottled up over the past several years. If so, then I couldn't help but cringe at myself a bit for opening the floodgates on this virtual stranger.

Anzu simply stared at me in speechless surprise, eyes wide open, her mouth agape. It was pretty much the reaction I'd expected. I braced myself for whatever words of ridicule or disdain she might have for me. I was fully prepared for her to call me crazy, or pathetic, or even a creep. What I wasn't prepared for was a muffled "Pfft" sound—followed shortly thereafter by wild and uncontrollable laughter.

"Ahhhh ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Somehow, some way, she'd managed to perfectly subvert my expectations once again. This was not an appropriate time for laughter. Yet laugh Anzu did, and for quite a while to boot, to the point that she actually started to cry from how downright hysterical my tragic backstory apparently was to her.

"God, you're such a weirdo," she giggled, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Me?! I'm *the weirdo here?!*

"So have you told anyone else about this tunnel yet?" she asked.

"No, and I wasn't planning to. I mean, who the hell would believe me?"

"Yeah, fair point." Anzu still had the giddiest grin on her face.

Yet I still had no idea what she found so amusing about all of this.

"Hey, Tono-kun!" she said, suddenly hopping forward to get right up close to my face. Almost a little too close, actually. As my heartbeat quickened, the only thing my brain could focus on was how long her eyelashes were.

"Y-yeah? What is it?"

"Wanna team up with me?!"

"Huh? S-sorry, come again?"

“We could work together to unravel the mysteries of the Urashima Tunnel, and then we could *both* get our wishes granted! Two heads are always better than one, right?!”

“You…wanna work together…?”

I mulled it over a bit. My original plan had been to scare her off so well that she’d never bug me again, but this was actually a pretty decent idea in its own right. I didn’t know if she was prepared to take this as seriously as I was, but having someone else to help out would definitely expedite the process. If nothing else, I wouldn’t have to keep running back and forth in and out of the tunnel to figure out how things worked. Plus, I liked the cut of her jib; the idea of teaming up in pursuit of a mutual objective appealed to me, and she had showed a lot of initiative by making the proposal as the newcomer to the negotiation table. So, after weighing the pros and cons of both options, I ultimately decided to take her up on her offer.

“All right. Let’s do it,” I said with a decisive nod.

“Great! Then it’s settled!”

Anzu took a step back and curled her lips into a devilish little smirk, causing the wad of gauze on her cheek to bend ever so slightly. It was such a mischievous smile that I couldn’t help but feel like I was being duped somehow—not that I could really think of how she’d ever benefit from deceiving me in a situation like this. Though that reminded me:

“So hey, I was wondering—what the heck are you doing here, anyway?”

“Oh, right. There was something I wanted to ask you.”

So you followed me all the way here from school? Why didn’t you call out to me back in town and get it over with?

However, she addressed this quickly, almost as if she’d read my mind.

“But then after trailing you for a while, I guess I was having too much fun to want to blow my cover…” she admitted bashfully.

It seemed stalking people was her idea of a good time.

“Okaaay… So what was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Oh, I totally forgot. Sorry.”

“…You’re kidding me, right?”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“I mean, that was a pretty jarring experience just now. Is it really that hard to believe it might make me lose track of something that probably wasn’t all that important to begin with?”

So Anzu claimed, but I really did find it pretty hard to believe, considering she’d seemed cool as a cucumber throughout the entire process. Either she was lying through her teeth or she had truly forgotten—but I wasn’t about to press her on it, since I could think of no reasonable hypothesis as to why she might lie about this.

“Anyway… Do we have ourselves a deal or what?” Anzu extended her right hand toward me.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. Am I supposed to pay you now, or…?”

“What? No, silly. I’m not trying to extort you,” she shot back. Then her face relaxed into a warm and welcoming smile. “I’m saying let’s shake on it.”

“Oh… R-right, okay. That makes a lot more sense.”

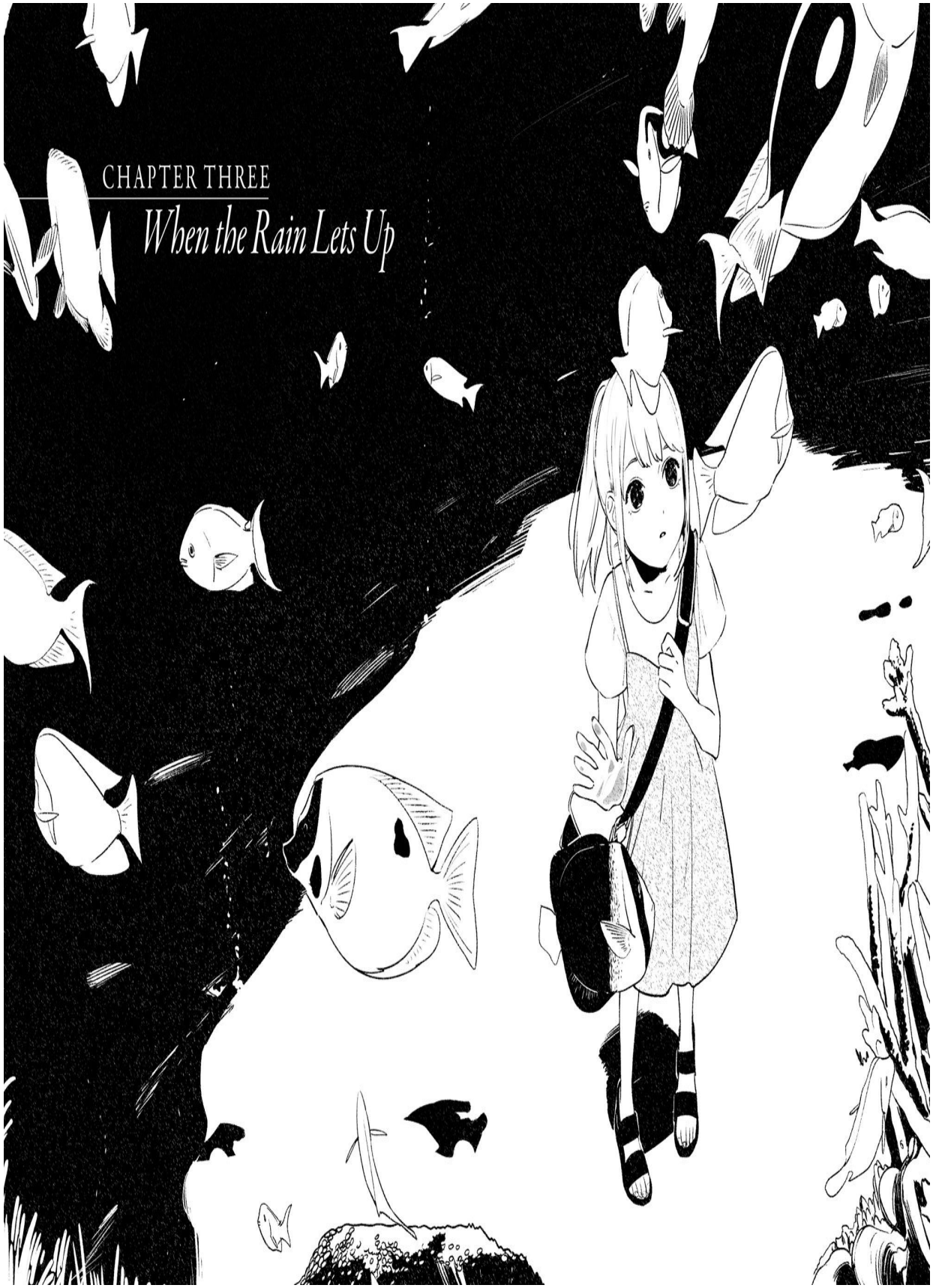
While I still felt a bit of trepidation as to how fast this was all happening, I reached out a trembling hand regardless. Anzu quickly snatched it up and clasped it firmly with her own.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Tono-kun.”

“…Yeah, likewise.”

With that final gesture of goodwill, the two of us said our goodbyes to the Urashima Tunnel for the night. The entire way home, however, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d been thoroughly bamboozled.

OceanofPDF.com


CHAPTER THREE
When the Rain Lets Up

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 3:
When the Rain Lets Up

AFTER CLASSES got out the next day, I stood waiting for Anzu at the entrance to the Urashima Tunnel, having gone straight there from school. It was about twenty minutes past the time we'd agreed to meet up, yet still she hadn't shown. Having to wait for someone beneath the scorching midsummer sun with no means of contacting them was a form of torture I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemies. If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have suggested we walk there from school together. Finally, after nearly thirty minutes of waiting, Anzu came prancing airily down the wooden staircase, not in any rush whatsoever. I had to admit, she did look quite graceful, even *with* the big wad of gauze still strapped to her face.

"Hey. You been waiting long?" she asked.

"Yes. Like a full half hour, actually," I grumbled.

"Wow, that sucks," she said without a hint of remorse. "Anyway, check this out." She reached into her bag and pulled out a spool of nylon rope, still in the shrink wrap. "Took me forever to find a store that sold this stuff. Never realized how inconvenient living out in the boonies would be."

"Why do we need that, exactly?"

"Heh heh…" Anzu chuckled devilishly. "We're gonna run a little experiment."

Once Anzu was done explaining her "experiment" idea to me, I went over the steps in my head to make sure I had the whole thing straight. One of us was going to walk inside the tunnel at a (relatively) fixed velocity while carrying the loose end of the nylon rope, while the other person stood outside holding the spool, spinning it gradually to give it more slack while ensuring it remained taut. For as long as the flow of time remained normal, the nylon rope would continue to unreel at approximately the same rate—

but as soon as the tunnel walker crossed over the boundary where time began to distort, the person on the outside *should* immediately notice the rope being pulled much faster. Then, at that exact moment, the person with the spool would grab the rope and yank it hard to stop the tunnel walker from taking any more slack, thereby letting them know they'd crossed the cutoff point and could come back out.

With this method, it would theoretically be possible to find the boundary where the flow of time began to distort without having to run in and out of the tunnel several dozen times. Not only was I impressed by what a clever idea this was on Anzu's part, it also conveyed to me just how serious she was about uncovering the mysteries of the Urashima Tunnel, which genuinely surprised me. After all, this was an inexplicable, time-twisting space—almost like an "anti-hyperbolic time chamber," to borrow Shohei's example. If we weren't careful, there was a very good chance that several years could pass us by while we were investigating inside, and there was still no guarantee that it actually had the power to grant wishes. This was not a challenge to be taken lightly, and I had to wonder if Anzu had yet to fully grasp the potential repercussions.

"So you're really ready to go all-in on this, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" Anzu replied.

"I mean, we're talking about a place where weeks fly by in minutes. If you could just go in and out and get your wish granted, that'd be one thing, but we have no idea how deep this tunnel goes. I can tell you from personal experience that it also does some pretty freaky crap to mess with your head."

"Sure, I get that it's dangerous. But if you're not willing to take risks, you'll end up spinning your wheels your entire life."

"Yeah, on certain things, maybe. There's still a line between fearlessness and recklessness."

"What are you trying to say? Do you want me to leave so you can explore the tunnel all by yourself? Is that it?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm trying to get a feel for how serious you are about this… Most people would be shaking in their boots at

the prospect, y'know."

Anzu rolled her eyes so hard I thought they might disappear into the back of her head. "Good thing I'm not most people, then."

"…Is that really something to be proud of?"

"Of course it is. I hate normal people. They're worthless."

I couldn't help but laugh at this. "Damn. That's a pretty harsh take."

"I mean, it's true, though. There's no value in being ordinary. The law of scarcity applies to way more than just economics. Rare, life-changing experiences are worth exponentially more than your average day-to-day. I'd much rather live a short, fulfilling life than a long and boring one."

"Mmm… I mean, I'll agree with you there, but I feel like it's a little unfair to say that *all* ordinary things are worthless. Like, sometimes there's comfort in familiarity. And sometimes common things are more popular than uncommon things for a reason."

"Like for example?"

"Like, uh…salmon, maybe? I mean, I know most people tend to think of salmon as being like, the 'vanilla' option when it comes to seafood, but to me, it tastes a hell of a lot better than any of the fancier, more expensive fish out there. Like, you could take me to the grocery store right now and offer to buy me anything I wanted, and you sure as hell wouldn't catch me picking eel or whatever. I'd take salmon over that even on special occasions."

"I think eel's way better than salmon, personally."

"Oh. Well, fair enough, I guess," I said. *Sheesh, way to totally deflate the conversation. Not that it wasn't a totally stupid discussion to begin with…*

"But y'know? For a normie, you're pretty interesting, Tono-kun. I like that about you," said Anzu, grinning from ear to ear.

I suddenly got butterflies in my stomach. It still felt like I had no idea who this girl really was on the inside. In school, she was the most antisocial person imaginable, purposely distancing herself from other people. But then

she also had somewhat of a childish, mischievous side, as evidenced by the way she'd secretly followed me to the tunnel from school the day before. Then on very rare occasions, she could show a bit more of a feminine side, saying cutesy stuff like this that could easily be misinterpreted as flirtatious. I wondered which of the three was the real Anzu. Maybe none of them were.

"Anyway, come on. We're wasting daylight here," she said. "We'd better get this show on the road."

"R-right. Sorry."

It felt like she'd kind of dodged the question, but whatever. For now, we had an experiment to run.

It was quickly decided that I would be the one walking into the tunnel with the end of the nylon rope. Anzu would wait outside with the spool, and as soon as I felt a hard tug on the rope, I'd know it was time for me to turn back.

"Y'know… This kinda reminds me of playing telephone," I muttered to myself as I walked down the dark corridor.

Way back when, Karen and I had made one of those makeshift telephones out of two tin cans and some string, then played with it all day—going upstairs and dropping one end out the second-floor window to the other person in the backyard so we could share utterly meaningless intel with each other. As you can imagine, this got old pretty quick, and we never played with it again after that day—but it was still fun enough that I remembered it fondly to this day.

"Sure hope I'll find you in here, Karen…"

I squinted my eyes and looked ahead. I could see the dim light of the torches on the walls coming up. I was getting close to the torii, which still seemed to me like the most reasonable location for the time distortion boundary. Bracing myself, I continued forward at the same pace and passed beneath the first gate—

The nylon rope pulled taut behind me. Anzu had officially given me the signal, so I spun around and headed back toward the exit. When I made it outside, I found her standing there with her hands placed on her hips, looking awfully proud of herself.

“Why, hello there, Tono-kun. You’ll be pleased to know that you were in the tunnel for nearly twenty minutes.”

“Wait, seriously? But I came straight back the moment I felt the signal…”

“Yes, which means you must have already crossed over the boundary at that point. So tell me—how far did you get?! Was it right after the first torii like we thought?!”

Overwhelmed by the sudden barrage of questions, all I could do was nod.

“*Yes!* It actually *worked!*” Anzu let out a little squeal of delight. I couldn’t help but be charmed by her sudden burst of pure, childlike glee.

Now that we knew where the boundary was, we could easily measure exactly how much time distortion went on in there. I was about to suggest that we go do that right away, in fact, but then I realized it was half past five and would probably be dark outside by the time we finished.

“Why don’t we pick back up tomorrow? It’s getting kinda late,” I noted, but Anzu shook her head.

“No, I’d really like to get this figured out today if we can,” she said. “Unless there’s some reason you need to be home soon?”

I thought about it. I did generally need to be home so that I could get dinner ready before my father got back from work, but he’d been leaving the office pretty late recently, so I figured I could afford to stay out a little longer.

“Nah, it’s cool. Let’s get this crap done.”

“Now *that’s* what I like to hear,” said Anzu with an emphatic nod. It really did seem like she was dying to know exactly how it worked.

“All right,” I said. “This time I’m gonna try going in there and counting to three before coming straight back out.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll wait right here.”

“Er, actually, I can probably handle this part by myself if you want. I mean, all I’ve really gotta do is check the time before and after I go in. I could just as easily tell you at school tomorrow.”

“I know. But we’re a team, remember? And now that we’ve finally figured out where the boundary lies, I definitely wouldn’t want to miss the big reveal. So I’m staying right here.”

“…You sure? Well, if you insist. Not like I can tell you no. All I was trying to say was that if I take too long, you’re more than welcome to go home without me.”

With that, I ventured back into the tunnel. This time, right as I stepped through the first gate, I started a timer on my phone—counted one, two, three—then jumped back out to the other side. I could already tell that it was a bit darker in the tunnel than it had been on the way in, which told me all I needed to know about how dark it had to be outside. If the sun had gone down, then I had to have been inside for at least an hour this time. Anzu had probably long since gone home too.

“Damn… It really does feel like the blink of an eye…” I marveled quietly to myself. Even though this was technically the third time I’d experienced the tunnel’s time distortion effect, I still hadn’t gotten used to it. To be fair, how could one ever get used to such a bizarre, supernatural phenomenon? Suddenly overcome by a great sense of unease, I picked up the pace and started walking faster, wanting nothing more than to get away from the eerie torii over my shoulder. When I made it back out, my prediction was proven right: the veil of night had begun to drape itself over the horizon. Surprisingly, my other prediction turned out to be dead wrong.

“Whoa! You’re *still* here?” I gasped, peering down at Anzu, who was sitting on the ground in the dark with her head buried between her knees.

“…Did I not *say* I was going to wait for you?” she snapped back as she abruptly jerked her head up. Her voice was tinged with a mixture of annoyance and relief.

To be sure, the way I'd emphasized the word "still" probably came across as a bit rude, especially considering how agonizing it must have been to have to wait for me out in the dark for God knew how long. I immediately found myself wishing I'd chosen my words more carefully, and I offered a sheepish apology. Anzu didn't acknowledge it; instead, her eyes shot wide open as though she'd had a sudden epiphany.

"Hey, enough about that!" she exclaimed. "What time is it?!"

"Oh, shoot! Good call."

I'd completely forgotten to check the time on my way out. Anzu shot up to her feet and checked her watch, not taking the time to wipe the dirt off the butt of her skirt. Obviously curious, I leaned in to look down at it as well. It seemed almost exactly two hours had passed since I entered the tunnel. Two whole hours, gone in a whopping three seconds. Which meant…

"I guess one second in the tunnel is equivalent to about forty minutes outside…" Anzu whispered under her breath, having come to the same conclusion. Then she quickly dug into her book bag, whipped out a pen and a notebook, opened it to a blank page, and started scribbling some calculations. I was amazed at how quickly she did all of the math in her head—I knew she was smart, but not necessarily *that* smart. When her pen finally came to a stop, I looked down at the page and examined her work. It was a list of different hypothetical periods of tunnel time, followed by their real-time equivalents.

1 sec = 40 mins

1 min = 40 hrs

1 hr = 100 days

1 day = 6.5 yrs

Thus read her calculations. Anzu turned to look up at me, her eyes wide and twinkling with excitement. "Six and a half years in *one day*! Are

you kidding me?! That's *crazy*! You could literally use this place like a cold sleep pod and skip ahead to the distant future!"

It was like she'd entirely forgotten the past two hours of boredom in an instant.

"Y-yeah, that's pretty crazy, all right. At the same time…"

While Anzu was gushing as though we'd stumbled upon the discovery of the century, a dark cloud of doubt grew bigger and bigger in my chest. Six and a half years in a day—two *decades* in three. You really could use it for bona fide time travel, no doubt about that. However, that would also mean leaving everything in the "past" behind. All our classmates would go on to graduate and get jobs without us, and everyone we ever knew would continue to grow older while we stayed the same. Kozaki High might not even be around anymore when we came back out, let alone my little house.

These were the sorts of changes Anzu would have to deal with in order to have her wish granted by the Urashima Tunnel, and I wondered if she was truly prepared. Or, hell, on the off *chance* that the tunnel might grant her wish, since we still had no proof that it actually possessed that ability. On top of that, there could be all sorts of other dangers associated with using the tunnel that were lying in wait for gullible idiots like us. Maybe once you went in beyond a certain distance, there was no coming back out. Granted, these were all risks I was prepared to take if it meant even the slightest chance of getting to see my little sister again, but in Anzu's case, I had no idea what she was after. No notion where her motivations lay.

I shot a quick glance over at her. Her face was still flushed and ecstatic from the exciting implications of our new discovery. Even in the face of such dire possible consequences, she wasn't shrinking in the slightest. She was still clearly one hundred percent determined to conquer the Urashima Tunnel, even if she obviously knew it was a bad idea to dive in without doing our due diligence first.

Hey, Hanashiro. Why are you so dead set on this? What are you hoping to gain here?

I was this close to saying the words, but I choked them back down at the last second. The last thing I wanted to do was rain on her parade when she was obviously having a total blast. Besides, there'd be plenty of other opportunities for me to ask about her motives and end goals. One thing I could definitely say for sure, though, was that we should wait until another day to start the investigation proper—both to make the necessary preparations and to give Anzu some time to come down from this emotional high and start thinking rationally again. But for tonight, a little celebration in honor of an experiment gone well certainly wasn't going to hurt anyone.

It was two days after we nailed down the precise time ratio of the Urashima Tunnel. I was sitting across from Shohei making mindless small talk as we ate our lunches when all of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of Anzu out of the corner of my eye. She gave off a frigid, unapproachable aura as she ate her sandwich alone—and it was almost enough to make me think the more candid side of her I'd witnessed a couple days prior had been nothing more than a figment of my imagination. The giant welt on her face was now gone, thankfully, as was the wad of gauze.

"You're looking at the new girl again, dude," Shohei grumbled.

"Mm?" I said, finishing the current sip of my canned coffee milk and pulling the straw from my lips. "What's wrong with that? You got a thing for her? Possessive much?"

"Oh, shut up. I'm gonna beat your ass."

"Heh. Easy, man. I'm just messing with you."

"Seriously, dude—if you're that curious about her, you should go say something to her. You're never gonna be her friend by watching her from afar like a creep."

"Yeah, I know."

I hadn’t told a single person about my new working relationship with Anzu—mainly because I figured it’d only draw unwanted attention to the both of us. I could only assume she’d been avoiding talking to me at school for the same reason.

“It’s not that I really wanna be *friends* with her or anything, though,” I went on. “I find her behavior kinda interesting, is all. You never know what she’s gonna do next.”

“Hrm… Well, she *is* a bit of an enigma, I’ll give you that. Hell, I heard someone saw her climbing over the fence onto the train tracks the other day. Who even *does* that kind of crap?”

“…Yeah, good question.”

So she was seen, huh…? Would have expected her to be more cautious than that.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me!” Shohei blurted out. “I *also* heard a little rumor about Kawasaki’s punk-ass boyfriend. They’re saying he fully dropped out of school.”

“Wait, what? Seriously?”

“Yep. Somethin’ about having to take over the family fishing business, apparently. But if you ask me, I’m guessing he was too embarrassed to come back to school after getting his ass handed to him by a girl.”

“Heh. Well, good for him. Hopefully it helps him build a little character.”

“For real,” said Shohei, stuffing his cheeks with a huge rice ball.

Come to think of it, Koharu hadn’t been back to school since that day either. I wondered if she would end up dropping out too.

Finally, classes were over for the day. As I closed my textbook and shoved it in my book bag, an announcement rang out over the intercom.

“Kaoru Tono from Class 2-A, please report to the faculty room. I repeat: Kaoru Tono…”

It was Ms. H's voice.

"Uh-oh, bro. What'd you do this time?" Shohei teased.

"Hell if I know." I shrugged. It was the truth—I genuinely had no idea.

I finished packing up my things and headed out of the classroom, then made eye contact with Anzu as I walked past her in the hall. She gave me a silent nod, then turned around and walked down the stairs…but I wasn't sure whether that was supposed to mean "I'll wait for you outside," or "Let's call it off for today." Would have been nice if she used her words, but alas, I couldn't be bothered to chase her down and ask, so I headed straight on to the faculty room, turning left around the next corner. When I reached the door at the end of the hallway, I quietly slid it open and announced my arrival, then wove between the cubicles over to Ms. H's desk.

"Um, Ms. Hamamoto? You called for me?" I asked, and she turned to look up at me. Then, setting aside whoever's quiz she was grading, she swiveled around in her seat and gave me a big, friendly smile.

"Oh, there you are, Tono-kun. Sorry to call you up out of the blue."

"That's okay. What did you need me for?"

"Yes, well. It's about Kawasaki-chan, actually."

"Oh? What about her?"

"Well, as I'm sure you've noticed, she hasn't shown up for school the past couple of days. She did call in to say she wasn't feeling well, but I'm starting to get a little worried about her. Was thinking that if she doesn't come back soon, a little house call might be in order."

"Okaaay…" I said. *What does that have to do with me, exactly?*

"Which is where you come in, Tono-kun. Could you be a dear and deliver Kawasaki-chan's summer English homework?"

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you. I already asked some of her friends if they'd be willing to handle it, but apparently they're all too busy."

I assumed she was referring to the girls in Koharu's usual posse. Probably that Haneda chick and the other one, Sado. If I had to guess, they'd blown Ms. H off out of laziness or spite. Hence why she'd resorted to asking me.

"You two went to the same junior high, correct?" asked Ms. H. "So I figure you probably know where she lives."

"I mean, I do, yes…"

"Then can I count on you to take care of it?"

She'd put me in a tough spot. Anzu and I were planning to meet up and further explore the Urashima Tunnel. Though even if we weren't, I didn't really feel like doing grunt work for the sake of the girl who'd always made me do *her* grunt work.

"Sorry, I've kinda got plans this afternoon…"

"Oh? What kind of plans?"

"I was gonna go hang out with a friend for a while."

"Really, now? And do what, exactly?" Ms. H inquired, and I kind of just stood there perplexed, wondering why my teacher would ever need to know that. Then she smiled and dropped the bomb: "Not another reenactment of *Stand By Me*, I hope?"

"…Sorry? Come again?"

"The school received an eyewitness report the other day from someone who'd seen 'that Tono kid' walking illegally along the train tracks. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Aw, crap. Somebody saw that? And to think I just got done judging Hanashiro for the exact same thing…

"Er, yeah, about that… Thing is, I'd missed the train, and I couldn't afford to wait for another, so I decided to take a little shortcut home, and, uh…"

"So it really *was* you, then," she sighed, disappointed. "Oh, Tono-kun. You know, we're typically supposed to call a parent or guardian when we receive reports like this…"

Oh God. If my father found out about this, I'd really be in for it. Seeing no other recourse, I panicked and started groveling. "I-I'm really sorry! I promise it won't happen again! Just please don't call my house…"

"You didn't let me finish."

I held my tongue and listened to what Ms. H had to say.

Apparently, the person who'd called in had requested that the school let me off with a simple warning, since they knew my family had "fallen on hard times" in recent years, and it was Ms. H's intention to respect their wishes. I wasn't sure whether to feel grateful for this stranger's goodwill. I often found myself annoyed at how quickly word got around our enclosed rural community, since it meant everyone knew about all of my family's nasty little secrets.

"Regardless, please, no more walking on train tracks, okay? You could literally get run over and die—and even if you didn't, you'd get hit with a nasty fine for forcing the train to stop."

"Yes, ma'am… It won't happen again."

"Good. Well then, I suppose I'd be willing to let it slide, just this once…" Ms. H began, before ominously trailing off into an excruciating pause. "…Then again, you've had a lot of absences and late arrivals recently, so perhaps a phone call home really is in order. That is, unless you're willing to prove to me you're committed to doing better going forward."

"And how can I do that?"

"Oh, I don't know… Maybe by offering to step up and check in on another student who hasn't been showing up lately? Maybe bring them their homework while you're at it?"

So it was a thinly veiled threat, then. Do as she asked, or she'd call my father.

"…All right, fine. I'll deliver Kawasaki's homework."

"You will? Oh, bless your heart! Here you go, then!" she said, handing me a staple-bound English workbook. I put it in a plastic sheet protector and slid it into my book bag. As I walked out of the faculty room,

I made a mental note that we'd need to find another route to the tunnel going forward, even if it required a massive detour. Walking along the train tracks again would be far too risky.

Now then. I needed to let Anzu know I'd been conscripted for homework delivery duty, as well as that we'd been seen walking along the tracks. Presumably, she knew I'd been called to the office, but I wasn't sure where I might find her. I decided to check back in the classroom for starters, but she wasn't there. Then I figured she might be waiting in the main entryway, but she wasn't there. I supposed it was *possible* she'd gone home or headed to the Urashima Tunnel by herself, but…

Ugh. Times like these made me really wish we had each other's contact information. Scouring every corner of the school wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I changed out of my indoor shoes and walked out of the building, scanning the courtyard as I made my way off campus. Right as I passed through the main gate, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

"Tono-kun."

"Whoa! Jeez, you scared me…"

Sure enough, it was Anzu. She'd been waiting off to the side of the main entrance to campus with her arms folded and her back against the wall.

"Took you long enough," she said grumpily as she pushed off the wall.

"Sorry, I was trying to find you. I would've called you, but…"

"Oh, right. I never gave you my number, did I?"

"Nope. But yeah, I was just thinking we should do that. Makes things a whole lot more convenient, at least."

"Yeah, okay!" Anzu exclaimed, sounding surprisingly ecstatic as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. We quickly typed each other's contact info into our respective address books.

"This is so exciting!" she squealed. "I've never traded numbers with someone before!"

“Wow, no kidding?”

“What about you, Tono-kun?!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty new to me too. You’re only my second contact ever.”

(The first had been Shohei, for the record.)

“…Second, huh. Well, gee, aren’t you special,” she grumbled. Her expression went from beaming to deadpan in zero seconds flat—it was quite the dramatic mood swing. She closed out of her address book and shoved her phone back in her pocket. “So I heard you got called into the faculty room. What was that all about?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess someone saw me walking along the train tracks the other day, so I kinda got chewed out for that. No biggie.”

“Huh. Well, fair enough.”

“Speaking of which, I heard someone spotted you doing the same thing as me, so we really need to not use the train tracks going forward. I mean, not that it’s *that* big of a deal or anything. I got off relatively easy, I’d say.”

“Relatively?”

“Oh, yeah… So, uh…” I began, scratching my cheek with one finger. “I actually got roped into running an errand for Ms. H. Gotta go stop by Kawasaki’s place and drop off some homework for her.”

“Kawasaki…” Anzu repeated, her expression darkening as if to say “How dare you utter that name in my presence.” And, well…after what Koharu had done to her, I couldn’t exactly blame her for feeling that way.

“Yeah, so I think we’ll have to call off the investigation for today. Sorry.”

“…All right.”

“Anyway, I’d better get going. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said and started walking toward the nearby bus stop. Then something tugged on the strap of my book bag, so I turned. Anzu was staring me straight in the eye.

“Wh-what’s up?” I asked.

“I’m going too.”

“Huh?”

Where in the hell had this change of heart come from? I was totally convinced that Anzu hated Koharu’s guts… Or maybe she wanted to come along precisely because she had a bone to pick with her? Was this a revenge thing?

“Uhhh, you sure about that? This is Kawasaki’s house we’re talking about.”

“Yes, I heard you the first time.”

“You don’t think it’ll get awkward or hostile or anything?”

“Oh, it might. Wouldn’t be surprised.”

Then why the hell would you want to come? I wanted to ask.

Before I could summon the nerve to ask, Anzu let out an impatient huff. “However, now that the investigation’s been called off, I’ve got nothing to do this afternoon. So I figured I’d tag along to kill some time, that’s all. Unless you don’t want me to come?”

“I mean, it’s fine, I guess… But we’re just dropping off some homework and leaving. So I’d better not catch you throwing hands.”

“Wow, excuse you. I would never.”

“Or legs.”

“I would never.”

With that, we made our way down from campus and hopped on the bus. The plan was to ride it for six stops, where we’d get off only a stone’s throw away from Koharu’s residence. We were leaving school a bit late, so there were actually very few other Kozaki High students on the bus, and certainly none who were sophomores like us. We sat at the very back of the vehicle, and I lazily gazed out the window and watched the scenery pass by as the driver took off.

When we passed through the shadow of a nearby hill, I could see Anzu's face reflected in the windowpane. She was sitting directly beside me, her nose buried in her book from the moment we settled in. Curious as to what kind of book it might be, I tried to examine the front cover through the reflection, but all I could really make out was the backside of an illustrated cat sitting on its haunches. I figured it was one of those "what would life be like from this animal's perspective" types of stories. All I knew was she'd been reading this book for a while, as it was the same one she'd had her nose buried in before she punched Koharu in the face.

"So do you totally hate Kawasaki, or what?" I asked randomly, turning my head back away from the window.

"Yep. Hate her guts," Anzu said without a mote of hesitation, not looking up from her book.

"Then why are you coming to her house?"

"Because I wanna go wherever you go."

She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and my face went bright red in turn. *Easy, Kaoru. Don't get the wrong idea. You're just working together. Nothing more than that.* I cleared my throat and did my best to keep my cool.

"Y'know, you really shouldn't say stuff like that so lightly," I warned her.

"How come?"

"Uh, because anyone other than me would probably take it the wrong way and get their poor little heart broken? Just a guess."

"Well, I wouldn't say it about anyone other than you."

"…Pretty sure you're giving me a little too much credit here. I'm just your average, boring-ass high schooler."

It was this that finally caused Anzu to tear her eyes away from her book and look directly into mine. "That's not true at all. You're not boring *or* average, Tono-kun. If you ask me, you're about as abnormal as they come."

“…Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?”

“Obviously.”

“Well, if you say so, I guess,” I said with a shrug, then rested my elbow on the windowsill once more. Shortly thereafter, the bus driver announced over the intercom that we were approaching the stop nearest to Koharu’s place, so I pushed the button to request our stop.

As the bus rolled up to the stop, I handed the driver three hundred yen, then descended the stairs and onto the sidewalk. Almost immediately, I smelled the pungent scent of wet earth. I glanced at the towering white thunderhead slowly advancing through the western sky.

“Looks like we’re gonna get rained on.”

“You think?” said Anzu. “But it’s so nice out right now.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure. C’mon, let’s hurry and get this over with.”

We quickly headed in the direction of Koharu’s house. Just a little way down the road, we came upon a compact apartment building with an okonomiyaki shop on the first floor. Koharu’s family lived on the upper level of this building. We climbed the stairs and soon arrived at the door with the KAWASAKI nameplate beneath the covered outdoor walkway. When I rang the doorbell, a loud *ding-dong* could be heard echoing from inside the building, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps darting over wooden floorboards.

“Who iiiis it?” called the occupant, swinging open the front door.

It was Koharu. She was clearly in “stay-at-home” mode, judging from her T-shirt and baggy sweatpants—as well as the thick-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. I’d known her since junior high, but this was my first time ever seeing her in glasses. I quickly deduced that she must have worn contacts at school. She seemed a little frazzled by the sight of us, but she quickly snapped back into her usual indignant glare.

“…What do *you* want?” Koharu demanded.

“Ms. H needed someone to drop off your summer homework.”

“And *you* guys volunteered?”

“Not exactly. But hey, we’re here now.”

“…Great.”

There was the slightest hint of sadness in Koharu’s eyes. Maybe she’d picked up on the fact that this likely meant that all of her usual posse had turned their noses up at the task, and was now pretty dejected about how quickly her so-called friends had abandoned her. Or maybe I was projecting.

Back to business. I held out the workbook, and she took it without a word. However, as I was gearing up to say goodbye and put an end to this strained interaction, I heard a strange sound creep up from behind me, almost like the hiss of TV static. I turned around, and sure enough, it had already begun to rain.

Great. It was a sudden downpour like I’d never seen. As I stood there wondering what the hell we were supposed to do now, a woman’s voice called out from inside the apartment.

“Koharu, it’s raining cats and dogs out there! Why don’t you invite your friends inside?”

“What?! No way!” Koharu shouted back, whirling around at the speed of light. “They’re not my *friends*, Mom!”

There was a loud stomping of footsteps as the woman rushed out into the entryway. She wore a simple apron and had her long hair tied up in the back. She appeared to be Koharu’s mother.

“Koharu! How can you be so rude after they came all this way?! I taught you better than that!”

“But Mom!”

“Sorry, you two.” Koharu’s mother smiled, pushing her aside. “She can be a bit of a grump sometimes. Don’t take it personally. Feel free to come on in!”

Anzu and I looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders, and then walked inside as instructed. Koharu, despite obviously being quite peeved

about this turn of events, showed us to her room without any further backtalk. When we got there, she motioned with her chin for us to have a seat, so we both obeyed and hunkered down on the carpet.

Aside from my little sister's, I'd never been in a girl's bedroom before. There was a vaguely sweet fragrance that I'd never smelled in any of my male friends' rooms. However, the room itself was far more austere than I would have expected from a girl as wild as Koharu: just a simple writing desk, a cream-colored dresser, and a closet. Hell, if it weren't for the bookshelf full of fashion magazines, one might have been forgiven for not realizing this was a teenage girl's room at all.

"Hey. Quit looking around like a snoop," Koharu snapped.

"S-sorry," I said, immediately turning my eyes down to the ground.

"As soon as the rain stops, you're outta here. Got it?"

I nodded profusely, and the conversation promptly died off. Anzu simply sat there, still as a porcelain statue, while Koharu fidgeted restlessly with her phone in her chair. The only sound that pierced the silence was the pitter-patter of raindrops on the windowpane. The anxiety was stifling. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore, so I tried to strike up a conversation with Koharu again.

"So you wear glasses when you're at home, huh?"

"Yeah, and? Are you saying I look dumb?"

"No, not at all."

"Good. Now shut up."

"Yes, ma'am."

Interaction attempt: failed. Once again, I cursed my lack of social skills. It seemed I had no choice but to sit quietly and wait for the rain to let up, so I hung my head in defeat—but then, Koharu herself broke the silence to address Anzu for the first time.

"What the hell are *you* doing here, anyway? I mean, Tono I can sort of understand, but *you*?"

"I'm only here because he's here," Anzu responded matter-of-factly.

“Sorry, what? Are you guys boyfriend and girlfriend or something?”

“Please. Tono-kun and I are kindred spirits. Don’t try to equate our relationship to a shallow, superficial one like yours.”

“Um, gross? I literally have no idea what that means, and I’m not sure I want to… Wait. What do you mean, ‘like mine’?”

“Aren’t you dating that juvenile delinquent you tried to sic on me?”

At this, Koharu clammed up.

“…We’re not dating,” she answered in a small and mousy voice.

“Wait, you’re not?” I chimed in, genuinely a little shocked. Granted, Shohei had mentioned before that the rumors were unsubstantiated, but they still seemed more believable to me than the alternative.

“He decided on his own to start acting like we were. Then I guess some genius saw that and assumed it was mutual, though I clearly wasn’t into the guy at all.”

“Huh. No kidding… Wait, but then how come you never denied it when all the rumors started swirling around?”

“I mean…why bother? People are gonna draw their own conclusions either way,” Koharu said, fidgeting uncomfortably as though there was something caught in her teeth. I could tell she was being evasive, but it was Anzu who actually called her out on it.

“Oh, I get it now. So you didn’t like him, but you *also* didn’t want to completely deny the possibility that you two were dating. In other words, you wanted to keep using his reputation as an intimidation factor, didn’t you? Like the daughter of a mob boss using her daddy’s name to scare off any small-time punks who might try to mess with her.”

Yeesh. I mean, I guess it’s a fitting analogy, but did we really have to go there?

“Wha… No, that’s not it at all!” Koharu barked in denial, her face going crimson.

Anzu just kept on going. “How isn’t it? If you weren’t trying to use his reputation to your advantage, you wouldn’t have threatened to go tell

your ‘guy friends’ how much I was getting on your nerves lest they jump me on my way home. Sure, maybe it wasn’t him specifically you were talking about in that instance, but it’s still using intimidation tactics to avoid getting your own hands dirty, so I’d say my point stands.”

Koharu bit her lower lip and began to tremble.

Oh God. She’s gonna cry.

Then Anzu delivered the finishing blow: “I mean, really. How fragile is your ego? You try so hard to maintain your tough girl persona, but is it just to cover up the fact that you don’t have any actual friends?”

That did it. The dam burst, and big, ugly teardrops cascaded down Koharu’s cheeks.

“Y-you don’t have to be so mean about it…” she whimpered, sniffling a few times before breaking down into full-on sobbing.

Flustered, I knew I had to do something. “C’mon, Hanashiro! That’s too far. You need to apologize.”

“Fiiine…”

“No, don’t give me that. Actually apologize to her.”

Anzu rolled her eyes but turned to face Koharu nonetheless. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to make you cry…even if I did say it knowing full well that it would hit you where it hurt.”

“A *sincere* apology…” I reprimanded.

However, Anzu showed no signs of remorse, and Koharu’s tears showed no signs of letting up. As I sat there all jittery between the two of them, the closet door suddenly burst open and out jumped two little boys, no more than elementary school age. They were, presumably, Koharu’s little brothers.

“Hey! Quit pickin’ on her!” one of them yelled as they both ran over to Anzu and started wildly flailing their arms at her. In a rare moment of discomposure, Anzu covered her face in a frantic attempt to block their punches while pleading with them to knock it off. Meanwhile, Koharu was

still busy bawling her eyes out. It was utter pandemonium, and I had no clue what to do.

Just then, the door swung open, and in came Koharu's mother with a tray of iced tea.

"Aha! *There* you are, you little rascals!" she said, pulling the two boys away and bopping them each on the head. Now all three of the Kawasaki siblings were crying loudly, and I was *extremely* ready to go home.

"Sorry about that little fiasco," said Koharu's mother after summoning me and Anzu out into the hallway for a little chat. She was laughing awkwardly with her hands placed firmly on her hips. "Anyway, something tells me my daughter started it, but if you could try not to let things escalate going forward, I'd really appreciate it. She really is a sweet girl deep down, you know."

All I could do was nod my head in shame. Even Anzu, for all her lack of remorse, was now meekly hunched over like a scolded pet.

"You wouldn't believe how quickly she came dashing out of her room when she heard the doorbell ring earlier. I don't know what happened with her friends at school, but I think she must be pretty lonely right about now. Obviously, I can't make you bury the hatchet and be friends with her, but at least try to get along, would you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, then looked over at Anzu, who simply nodded.

"Great. Well, it's still raining pretty hard out there, so feel free to stick around and take it easy a little longer if you like." With that, Koharu's mother retreated down the hall into the other room.

"If we like," she says… After what just happened, it would be pretty shameful to bow out and go home now. So we opened the door to Koharu's bedroom once more, where we found the three siblings engaged in some sort of card game on her bed. As soon as Koharu saw us enter, though, she gathered up all the cards and handed them to her little brothers.

“Okay, back to your room now,” she said, and they obediently got up.

“If they pick on you again, Sis, just let us now!” said one of the boys.

“Yeah! We’ll make ’em pay next time!” said the other.

The two boys stuck their tongues out at us as they marched out of the bedroom, taking their adorable sibling dynamic with them. Now alone again in the room with Koharu, we just kind of stood there uncomfortably for a while until she suggested we sit down and we obliged.

“So what did Mam… What did my mom say to you?”

“Nothing much,” I said, making an amused mental note of the fact that she apparently called her mother “Mama” most of the time. “Just told us to take it easy.”

“She asked you to be friends with me, didn’t she?”

All I could do was smile sheepishly. Koharu grabbed the beanbag pillow at her side and promptly buried her face in it. “Ugh, she’s so embarrassing… This sucks… Just kill me now.”

Obviously, I knew she wasn’t *literally* saying she wanted to die, but it still felt terrible to hear her so mortified. Yet I didn’t have enough experience dealing with women to know how to talk my way out of this one.

“You’ve got a weak mindset,” Anzu cut in ruthlessly.

Yikes, man. Not that I had any better ideas as to what to say, but I knew that sure as hell wasn’t going to remedy the situation. I tried playing mediator once more. “C’mon, Hanashiro. You’re the one who took things too far… At least act like you wanna make it up to her, sheesh.”

“What’s the point in pretending? I’m not going to take back what I said.”

“I know, but still…”

“You’re too soft, Tono-kun.”

“No, you’re unreasonably harsh.”

As we carried on arguing with one another, Koharu suddenly lifted her head back up out of her pillow.

“Hey… How do you act so invincible all the time, anyway?” she asked Anzu in a meek little voice, like a pupil seeking guidance from their master. Which might have been exactly what was happening, now that I thought about it. I turned and gave Anzu the sternest glare I could muster, demanding she answer this one in good faith—or else.

Anzu apparently got the message, because she slouched her shoulders a bit and begrudgingly began to explain. “I mean, it’s not like there’s a secret method to it. However…”

“However?”

“If I had to sum it up, I’d say it’s all about not being afraid to punch people’s lights out.”

Welp. That sure wasn’t the sort of thing you’d expect to come out of a teenage girl’s mouth.

“You’ve gotta set hard boundaries for what you’ll put up with internally. Like, if someone does this, that, or the other thing to me, I’m gonna punch ’em in the face. Once you do that, it’s easier to analyze situations and yourself from a top-down perspective. Helps you keep a level head and avoid letting your emotions take control.”

“What do you mean by ‘top-down’…?” asked Koharu, tilting her head.

“Yeah, sorry. Not the best metaphor. But you know those old video games, where you’re looking down at your character, and you can see their HP and MP and all that jazz off to the side? It’s kind of like that, where you try to see your emotions as quantitative values and act accordingly based on the overall severity of the situation, rather than making knee-jerk responses. Just like how you might only use a potion when you get below half health, you’ve gotta actively decide to only take a swing at someone after they cross a certain line. Oh, and you always want to get the first strike, if at all possible. Because most of the time, all it takes is one good, hard punch to leave people too stunned to respond. Also, if you know your opponent’s a

lot stronger than you, don’t be afraid to arm yourself accordingly or resort to underhanded tactics. Whatever it takes to get the job done.”

It was a surprisingly detailed explanation, albeit a highly unsettling one. Just how many fistfights had Anzu gotten into in her lifetime?

“…That’s crazy. I could never do that,” Koharu said, sulking. Neither could I, to be fair.

“I mean, I’m not saying you should go around picking fights just to build confidence. But you do have to learn how to face your problems head-on, or you’ll be a bluffer your entire life. Nothing’s going to change unless you do.”

Koharu shuddered visibly. Her face was starting to go pale. “Where do I even start?”

“Don’t ask me. That’s your problem.”

It looked like Koharu was about to start crying again, so I nudged Anzu with my elbow. She scratched her head as though she was sick and tired of having to play the therapist, but resumed her little pep talk regardless.

“Anyway, my point here isn’t that violence can solve all your problems, for the record. Again, this is about setting your own boundaries and sticking to them. Staying true to your convictions and not letting anyone peer-pressure you into doing otherwise. Do it long enough, and not only will it build up your self-esteem, but you’ll also be a much cooler person in general. There’s nothing more uncool than insecurity. It’s that same insecurity that led you to hide behind that temperamental thug’s reputation and let everyone in school think you two were dating. Isn’t that right?”

“I mean…yeah…”

“Well, there you go, then. My advice to you would be to start living on your own terms for once. I don’t care what those terms might be. Just set expectations for yourself and follow through on them. It’ll probably really suck at first, but it’ll help you get much closer to the person you actually want to be, so I’m pretty sure you’ll be a lot happier in the end.”

“The person I…want to be…?”

“Correct. Because at the end of the day, there’s no one right way to live our lives. All we can do is pick whatever path suits us best, then run down it as fast as we can to see how far we can get in what little time we have,” said Anzu, followed by a conclusive sigh as she turned to look out the window. “Oh hey, would you look at that. The rain finally let up.”

Since we agreed we’d only stay until the weather cleared up, Anzu and I figured it was about time we took our leave. We said our goodbyes, walked out the front door, and immediately had to squint our eyes at the harsh glare of the setting sun. However, no sooner had we descended the stairs at the end of the outdoor hallway than a voice called out from behind us. Turning around, I saw that Koharu had come chasing after us in her slippers. She scrambled down the stairs before sliding to a stop right in front of Anzu, then started nervously twiddling her thumbs at belly button level.

“…What now?” Anzu asked dubiously.

“Oh, yeah, um… So, like, all that stuff you said just now? I’ll be honest: you totally hit the nail on the head. Like, that was so freakishly accurate, you’re either psychic or I’m even more pathetically transparent than I thought… Anyway, uh… I wanted to apologize, I guess. For being such a horrible person to you up until now. I’m sorry.”

Koharu bowed her head low, and my jaw dropped in turn. I’d never seen this girl apologize to a teacher when she got in trouble, so watching her humble herself like this was almost too surreal to believe. That stuff Anzu said back there must have really sparked some sort of change inside of Koharu.

Anzu seemed pretty taken aback by this too. There was a good, long pause before she actually responded to the apology. “…It’s fine. I’m not hung up on it.”

“Well, if you say so… Oh, and Tono?”

“Yeah?” I replied.

“I owe you this.” Koharu reached into her pocket and pulled out three thousand-yen bills, then practically shoved them into my hand.

“Wait, what’s this for? I never lent you *this* much money…”

“It’s to pay you back for everything I’ve extorted from you. I don’t remember the exact amount, so I’m sorry if it’s not enough.”

“Nah, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s *not* okay. I’m trying to make a clean break here, so just take it, all right?”

A clean break, huh? Guess I can’t really say no in that case, I thought. “All right. If you insist.”

I pocketed the bills, then we said our goodbyes to Koharu yet again before leaving the apartment building behind. We walked in silence along the rain-slicked sidewalk, inhaling the scent of fresh precipitation rising up off the asphalt. Countless puddles lined the roadway—the biggest and most transparent of which reflected the blinding light of the setting sun. We soon arrived at the bus stop. I checked the schedule and saw that the next bus wouldn’t be arriving for another twenty minutes. Unfortunately for us, the nearby bench was utterly soaked from the rain, so we had no choice but to wait side by side on the shoulder of the road.

It was quiet all around. Off in the distance, a lone evening cicada sang its song.

“Well, I’m glad we managed to get her back on her feet,” I said, spouting words to fill the silence. I was still expecting at least an “uh-huh” from Anzu, yet no reply came. Curious, I glanced over at her. She kept staring straight ahead. Her profile seemed to almost glimmer in the streaks of receding sunlight. Then I watched as her pursed lips opened slowly to utter a few pointed words:

“Do you have a crush on Kawasaki?”

I was so blindsided by this that I couldn’t answer for a moment.

“Who, me? No way—are you kidding? She’s like an apex predator; we’re not even on the same level of the food chain. If she’s a killer whale, then I’m a puny little jellyfish.”

“Uh-huh,” she grumbled dubiously.

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Well, you just seem awfully concerned about her.”

“I do?”

I was about to clarify that I really wasn’t, but then the words caught in my throat as I recalled Shohei saying almost exactly the same thing. The Stockholm syndrome conversation. Maybe it really did seem like I had a thing for Koharu from an outsider’s perspective. That wasn’t the case at all, to be clear. Sure, she had a pretty face, but her personality sucked. She was bossy, threatening, not to mention stubborn and selfish, while also a crybaby deep down… *Wait. Hold the phone.*

“Oh. Yeah, uh… I think I know why that might be.”

“Do tell.”

“Because she kinda reminds me of my little sister, in a way.”

“You mean like her face, or what?”

“Nah, her personality. Karen could be pretty stubborn a lot of the time too. Not in a selfish way—she’d throw fake tantrums and start crying and whatnot, but it was just a front she used to stop my folks from fighting or whatever. She was pretty calculating.”

Karen had been a super sharp kid. She realized early on that for a lot of families, it was the kids holding the marriage together. Anytime our mom and dad started having even a minor domestic dispute, she instantly picked up on it and start begging them to take us to the amusement park or the aquarium or whatever in an attempt to relieve the tension and force them to start making amends. I knew it hadn’t just been me imagining things either; she had definitely been stubborn on purpose.

“…Not sure I follow,” said Anzu.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m bad at explaining these things. But trust me, I definitely don’t have any deeper feelings for Kawasaki or anything,” I said conclusively, putting an end to the conversation before it could go any further off the rails. Then I asked a question of my own in rebuttal:

“Besides, you seem pretty concerned about her too, y’know. What with all that genuine life advice you gave her.”

“That’s just because…her mom asked us to get along with her.”

“Pretty sure she meant ‘you kids play nice now,’ not ‘literally make my daughter see the error of her ways and turn over a new leaf’…”

“Yeah, well. Some of us are overachievers, Tono-kun.”

There wasn’t really anything I could say to that—especially since the proof was in the pudding. Anzu seemed to have had a genuinely positive impact on Koharu… For now, at least. Whether it would actually last was another question entirely.

On that note, the conversation died off, and we stood in silence for the remainder of the time it took for the bus to arrive. It wasn’t an unpleasant silence by any means. Sometimes just being alone with someone feels nice, even if there isn’t anything to say.

The next thing I knew, I was at the aquarium, surrounded by a world of ethereal blue. The circular floor lights in the underwater tunnel were dim, and there were few people around. Through the thick ceiling glass, I watched as a massive whale shark floated leisurely over my head. Off to my side, a school of sardines swam by, so densely packed that they almost looked like an even bigger fish than the previous one.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to be there—if for no other reason than that my dead sister was crouched in front of the glass beside me. Then the cogs began to turn in my brain, and I realized that there was only one real explanation for this bizarre phenomenon. I was having a dream, a dream of the day all four of us had taken a trip to the aquarium as a family, just weeks before Karen passed away.

“It’s so pretty,” Karen whispered, pressing both hands against the glass. However, the look on her face told a different story; she looked kind of lethargic. I assumed her legs were tired, judging from the way she kept shifting her weight from ankle to ankle. Wanting to share in this lucid

dream with her as long as I could, I traced my memories back through the past and tried to respond with the exact same words I'd said back then.

"You wanna head home soon?"

"Mmm, nah," said Karen, her ponytail swinging from side to side as she shook her head. "Mom and Dad still need time to make up. Let's stay a little longer."

Our mother and father were standing some distance away, watching over us as they talked about who knew what. I did hear them laughing from time to time, which led me to believe that things were on the upswing.

"Well, if your feet hurt, I could give you a piggyback ride," I offered.

"Better idea! Let me ride on your shoulders!" said Karen, upping the ante.

"What? *Here?*"

"C'mon, pleeease?!"

Karen started yanking on the corner of my shirt, stretching the fabric as she whipped it from side to side. Begrudgingly, I knelt and let her climb on my shoulders, then held her ankles tight as I stood up, and she started giggling with glee. She rested her hands on my head, then gathered a big clump of my hair and bundled it together into a little topknot with a hair tie. This was my "control stick," which Karen could pull whichever way she wanted to have me move in that direction. It was basically just a more advanced form of playing horsey, but we had fun with it.

"Forward, Brobot!" she would say, and I'd start marching forward while making hydraulic whirring sounds with my mouth for each footstep (she really liked when I did that). Then when I'd inevitably get tired, I'd say "Re-questing re-fuel," and she'd hop down to give me a break. When she told me to fire my lasers, I'd kick over whatever small object lay in our path (not the most convincing laser beam, but we made do).

"Are you having fun, Kaoru?"

"Sure am," I replied. If Karen wanted me to take her somewhere, then I wanted to go there too. Her smile was more than enough reward.

“Yeah? Good,” Karen took her hands off the control stick and gently ran her fingers through my hair. “I’m glad we came, then.”

I was awakened by the sound of my alarm clock going off, and I opened my eyes to the familiar sight of my bedroom ceiling. Specks of dust danced in the few beams of morning sunlight that managed to leak in through the curtains. I sat up in bed and switched off the alarm, still reeling from the lucidity of that dream.

If I recalled correctly, we’d gone to see the dolphin show right after that. Karen and I had sat right in the front row (a.k.a. “the splash zone”) and were thus soaking wet by the end of the show—but still laughing our butts off, mind you. The dolphins had just been such wacky and playful creatures, we had been unable to contain ourselves. That was far from the only pleasant memory I had from those times too—when Karen was with us, pretty much every day had been full of wonder. If only she were still alive, maybe things would have remained that way to this day.

I got out of bed and headed into the hallway. After making sure my father wasn’t lurking in the kitchen, I stepped out the side door to the backyard, which had fallen into a state of utter neglect after my mother disappeared on us. I squatted below the bathroom window and reached my hand into the crawl space beneath the house; I quickly found what I was looking for and pulled it out.

It was a large rectangular tin that had originally held rice crackers or something, but which Karen and I had repurposed as a secret hiding place to store all our greatest treasures—a four-leaf clover, some marbles from ramune bottles—that sort of thing. Now it also housed some of the things that Karen had cherished most in her life, like her favorite comb and stuffed animal, as well as some of my favorite pictures of her. It was sort of a time capsule-slash-memento box dedicated to her memory.

Upon opening the lid, however, the first thing that jumped out at me were her old pair of red sandals. With the one I’d found recently in the Urashima Tunnel, they were once more a complete pair. Just looking at them like this set my heart at ease; it gave me hope that Karen might really

be out there, somewhere in this world. *Don't worry, Karen. I'll find you. Just wait for me a little bit longer.*

With that silent, prayer-like promise, I closed the lid and put the treasure box back under the house where it had always been, ever since we were kids. The secret hiding spot Karen and I had decided upon together. I would have loved to get the box out of the elements and move it into my room or something, but I knew my father would probably throw it out if he ever found it, so I'd left it there to be safe. The memory of him going off the deep end and getting rid of every last thing from Karen's room after my mother left was still fresh in my mind. It was the main reason I had so few mementos of her. I did resent my father for that, obviously, but I knew taking my anger out on him wouldn't do either of us any good. If anything, it'd fracture our relationship even further.

I bounced back up to my feet and checked the time on my phone. It had just turned 7 a.m. I headed back to my room to get ready for school.

It was approaching mid-July, and the midsummer heat was only getting more brutal. As I walked through the main gate onto campus, a couple of girls ran past, holding their book bags up like makeshift umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun. I changed into my indoor shoes, then headed through the hallway and into Classroom 2-A. Before I could get to my desk, I noticed there was yet another new girl in class. She had bobbed black hair and thick-rimmed glasses, and she looked like any other average girl—yet for whatever reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd seen her somewhere before.

Then it hit me: it was Koharu. She'd dyed her hair back to its natural color, and her skirt now stretched all the way down to her knees. It was a complete and total one-eighty from her previous bad girl aesthetic.

"Uh, Koharu? What happened to you? Please tell me that's not your new look," one of the girls from her old posse said mockingly, wasting no time in making fun of her for it. Koharu gave a simple noncommittal answer, neither confirming nor denying, and tried to shrug it off. Seeing her smile sheepishly and stumble over her words was such a drastic change

from her usual haughty demeanor that I genuinely wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't had the context of the events of the day prior.

"Dude, you think she lost a bet or something?" Shohei whispered in my ear. I hadn't even noticed him walk up to my desk.

"Guessing it's more like she decided to turn over a new leaf."

"A narcissist like her turning over a new leaf? Never thought I'd see the day."

"Yeah, well. She has been through a lot lately."

"I'll say, especially after the new girl humiliated her. Speaking of which, where did you run off to with her after school yesterday, anyhow?"

"H-how do you know about that?" I sputtered, totally caught off guard.

"Wow, so you guys *did* hang out, huh? One of the guys from calligraphy club mentioned he saw her sitting next to some dude on the bus yesterday. She's kinda the talk of the school right now, y'see. Anyway, I asked him to describe the guy she was with for me, and it sounded an awful lot like you, so I figured I'd open with a bit of a leading question to see if you took the bait."

Ah. Welp. It seemed I'd walked right into his trap.

"So? What's goin' on between you two?" Shohei asked, his voice oozing with intrigue.

"Nothing as scandalous as you're hoping for," I said, rolling my eyes. "We're not dating or anything. Hell, we're not even technically friends yet."

"Then where the hell were you going on the bus with her, huh? Last time I checked, you ride the train home, buddy."

"We just had to go to Kawasaki's place to drop off her summer homework."

"You *both* had to? How in the hell did that turn of events come about?"

"It's a long story, man. Would take years for me to even summarize. So out of respect for your time and mine, let's not and say we did, shall

we…?”

“No need to be a dick about it, dude,” Shohei scoffed. Clearly he realized that I was merely too lazy to explain. “But hey, can’t say I’m too surprised. You guys have a lot in common, after all.”

“What? Yeah, right. Just what exactly do she and I have in common?”

“Well, for one thing, you never open up to other people whatsoever. And from what I can tell, she’s the same way. Feels like you’re both kinda on the same wavelength in terms of wanting as little to do with other people as possible.”

“…Are you my therapist now?”

“Nah, I just like watching people and trying to analyze the psychology behind their behavior. It’s kind of a hobby of mine.”

“First I’ve heard of it.”

Before we could finish our chat, the warning bell for first period rang, so Shohei flashed me a peace sign and headed back to his own seat.

Before long, it was lunch. Normally, Koharu would have eaten with her posse seated around her desk, but today, she shot up with her lunchbox in hand the moment class was over. I watched her curiously, wondering where she might be going. To my surprise, she marched right over to Anzu’s desk and meekly held her lunch out in front of her.

“…Hey, um. Mind if I eat here today?”

Murmurs broke out all across the classroom. Even Anzu, who was in the process of opening her sandwich bag, seemed a little bewildered by the request.

“Suit yourself, I guess,” said Anzu.

Permission granted, Koharu went back and dragged the chair from her own desk over to Anzu’s, then removed the lid from her lunchbox and set it on the tabletop. It was a bizarre sight to behold: these two former enemies, who’d been at each other’s throats mere days ago, were now

breaking bread in silence together as equals. However, the peace and quiet wouldn't last for long, as that Haneda girl who'd once been a devout member of Koharu's posse soon strutted up to where the two were sitting with a big old smirk on her face.

"Um, Koharu, sweetie? Why in the world are you having lunch with *her*?"

I could tell from her tone that she wasn't upset about Koharu choosing to eat with someone who wasn't them; she was clearly just looking for more ammunition with which to ridicule their disgraced queen bee. Koharu looked down at the ground, visibly uncomfortable.

"Because…" she began, mumbling too inaudibly for me to make out the rest.

"Sorry, what was that? Could you speak up, maybe?" asked the girl.

"Because I wanna learn to be like her someday!"

The whole class went dead silent. It was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop. The Haneda girl stood there with her mouth hanging open, and Anzu looked just as taken aback. Hell, even I never would have predicted such a drastic change of heart. I'd assumed she was eating with Anzu because she felt like it would be way too dicey to try to fit in with her old friend group and she was desperate. Though perhaps that was the real reason, and Koharu had simply pulled this answer out of her ass because she couldn't come up with any better excuse on the spot.

However, as soon as Koharu's old friend realized she wasn't pulling her leg, she burst out cackling. "Ha ha ha ha! I'm sorry, what?! You can't be serious, right?!"

Sneers and snickers broke out as our other classmates began to murmur amongst themselves.

"Heh. Looks like someone realized they ain't that big of a deal after all."

"Guess her bad girl dominatrix act was all just for show, huh?"

"Did that punch to the face totally scramble her brain or something?"

It was like a public stoning, albeit with words instead of rocks. Yet Koharu did her best to endure it, though her face was bright red and her entire body was trembling.

“That’s hysterical,” the Haneda chick went on. “How do you plan on doing that again? Just gonna be a pathetic, antisocial loser from now on?”

“None of your business… Just leave me alone.”

“Aw, don’t be like that! Of course it’s my business! We’re friends, aren’t we?” Haneda said, egging Koharu on as she grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her back and forth.

For a so-called “friend,” she sure was being pretty ruthless. Koharu didn’t fight back; she just sat there refusing to make eye contact.

“Hey, c’mon! Say something, already!” the girl insisted, this time nearly shoving Koharu out of her chair. As she pulled her arms back, one of her hands caught on the placemat Koharu had laid out underneath her lunchbox, and the whole thing got yanked violently across the surface of the desk. Before Koharu could react, her lunch had been sent soaring through the air from the momentum. Even the girl bullying her hadn’t intended to go that far, if her horrified expression was anything to go by. But instead of apologizing, Haneda decided to lean into it and simply turned up her nose.

“That wasn’t intentional, for the record. It’s your own fault for not answering my question. Isn’t that right?” Haneda turned to seek the approval of the rest of Koharu’s ex-posse where they sat. They all nodded and offered some words of support. Not one of them took Koharu’s side.

Koharu opened her mouth to say something, but then stopped short and got down on the ground to begin cleaning her lunch off the floor. Seeing her hunched over—defeated, with tears of resignation in her eyes—genuinely hurt to watch, and I quickly set my food down to get up and offer to help her. Before I could, there was the loud screech of someone else roughly sliding their chair out from under their desk.

“Kawasaki.”

It was Anzu. She rose from her seat, totally expressionless, and walked over to stand beside Koharu. She was the last person I would have

expected to intervene, but the moment she stood, the Haneda girl started shaking in her boots.

“You said a minute ago that you wanted to be more like me, didn’t you?” Anzu asked Koharu, who simply nodded a few times in stupefied amazement. “Then watch and learn. I’ll show you exactly what to do when someone steps over your boundaries.”

Anzu slowly turned to face Koharu’s aggressor, then clenched her fists and held them up at eye level like a boxer. Everyone in class could tell that she was more than ready to punch this chick, whose face instantly turned deathly pale.

“Hey, w-wait a minute! I’m not looking for a fight with *you*! Stay the hell away from me, freak!” Haneda waved her hands frantically back and forth to indicate that she didn’t want any trouble. She turned on her heel and beat a hasty retreat back to her own desk.

“Humph. All bark, no bite,” Anzu scoffed, then pulled a tissue out of her pocket and started silently helping wipe the food off the floor.

Though Koharu seemed totally at a loss as to why Anzu was suddenly being so nice to her, she did at least remember to express her gratitude with a meek little “Thanks…”

I let out a heavy sigh. For a moment there, I hadn’t been sure how that was going to play out. I was glad we’d managed to avoid another altercation. That said, I couldn’t believe how much Koharu had grown overnight; it seemed she really did aspire to be like Anzu someday, which was probably why she’d made such an effort to keep her cool no matter how Haneda tried to get a rise out of her. I had to respect the level of determination it must have taken to decide to rebuild herself as a person from the ground up. Koharu had just earned herself some major props in my book.

Several hours had passed since that kerfuffle at lunch, and I was carving through dense undergrowth on a seldom-traveled dirt path at night, with only my pocket flashlight to light the way. These mountain trails were surprisingly loud at night—maybe even louder than the shrieking afternoon

cicadas. A plethora of different insects vied to be heard over each other, and the constant crowing of nightjars rang all through the forest.

“Ugh, this sucks…”

I’d made sure to cover myself from head to toe with bug spray before leaving the house, but I’d already gotten at least three mosquito bites. It had been a critical error on my part not to wear long sleeves. I would have loved to walk along the railroad tracks again, where there was no annoying underbrush to worry about, but unfortunately I couldn’t take any more chances after getting that warning from Ms. H the other day. So, unmarked trails and bug bites it was.

Eventually, after a long and hard-fought battle with Mother Nature, I finally arrived at the wooden stairway leading to the Urashima Tunnel. As I descended, I noticed white lamplight coming from right in front of the tunnel. Figuring it must be Anzu, I picked up the pace—and sure enough, it was. She was crouched, clutching her flashlight tightly with both hands as she used it to illuminate the ground directly in front of her. She didn’t seem to have noticed me yet.

“Hey, looks like you beat me here this time,” I called out to her as I reached the bottom of the stairs. She shot up to her feet like she’d seen a ghost and shone her flashlight at me. Thankfully, I managed to shield my eyes before going blind.

“You’re *late*!” she shouted.

I checked my cell phone. It was 8 p.m. “Aren’t I right on time, though?”

“You’re *supposed* to be five minutes early! Everyone knows that!”

“Oh, right. Says the girl who was more than thirty minutes late last time.”

“Not even remotely the same thing! That was during the daytime! You can’t leave an innocent young girl all by herself out here at night! What if I’d been gobbled up by a wild animal, and they found my bones licked clean the next morning and couldn’t even identify me?!”

“Pretty sure that’s never gonna happen. This isn’t the African savanna, last I checked. Besides, if you really didn’t want to come out here at night, why didn’t we do this tomorrow morning?”

“I already told you! Because I want to fit in as much investigating this weekend as we possibly can!”

Right. Today was Friday, July 12th. We had the day off on Saturday, and Monday was the school’s founding day, so we had that off as well. In other words, we were looking at a three-day weekend—which was highly valuable to us, considering that our biggest obstacle when it came to venturing deeper into the Urashima Tunnel was plain old time itself. Even the briefest, most bare-bones investigation of its inner reaches would cost an exorbitant amount of time, so having three days in a row that we could afford to lose was a rare and valuable asset. Getting started tonight as opposed to tomorrow morning gave us yet another twelve hours to use, so Anzu definitely had a point. Even with that extra time, though, we’d only be able to stay inside the tunnel for a whopping total of two minutes. I’d even gotten permission from my father to spend the night at a friend’s house all weekend long, all for two measly minutes.

“We don’t have time to stand around here talking either. You still remember everything we talked about in our prep meeting, I take it? Then let’s get going.” Anzu grabbed me by the hand and dragged me along with her as we took our first steps into the Urashima Tunnel’s gaping maw.

The warmish draft inside the tunnel tickled the back of my neck. You’d have thought it would be nice and cool in there so late at night, but something about the dark enclosed passage and its stifling humidity made it difficult to breathe. I wanted to get this done ASAP so we could head back to the fresh air outside. Our main goal for the day was to try to figure out how long the Urashima Tunnel might be. The plan was to run as fast as we possibly could, as far as we possibly could, as soon as we passed through the boundary, then come running straight back.

“So basically,” Anzu began, “if we can only afford to be in the tunnel for a total of two minutes, that means we should be able to make it about three hundred meters in if we’re going at a full sprint. Given our current elevation and the circumference of the hill the tunnel runs directly into,

there shouldn’t even *be* three hundred meters of underground for us to go through. Assuming all goes well, we *should* be able to make it out to the other side.”

“Ooh, good analysis. I’m impressed!”

“By what?”

“I dunno. You just sound like you know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Oh, pfft,” she snickered. “So you just like the sound of my voice, then. Got it.”

Man… She probably thinks I’m really dumb, huh?

“Anyway, I was doing some independent research in the library the other day,” she went on. “I tried to find any possible leads I could about the Urashima Tunnel, but there was nothing of value on the web or in any of the books on urban legends I checked. So all we can really do is feel it out for ourselves and investigate based on our own personal experiences.”

“Damn, Hanashiro. You’re really putting in the work on this… Uh, but could you let go of my hand now? You’re squeezing pretty tight.”

Anzu stopped dead in her tracks and instantly relinquished her death grip on my hand, which she’d maintained ever since she dragged me into the tunnel. If it were just a nice, tender hand hold, maybe I wouldn’t have said anything (even though I’d have been losing my mind on the inside), but she had been digging her nails deep into my skin, so I had no choice but to point it out.

“R-right, sorry. Guess it would be kind of silly for us to hold hands the whole time.”

“I mean, if you wanna hold hands, I don’t mind. Just not like *that*…”

“It’s fine. Forget it. C’mon, let’s go.” Anzu urged me onward.
I started to walk again, but soon something tugged me backward once more. Anzu was gripping the back of my shirt with both hands and standing mere centimeters behind me—to the point that with every little step I took, the toes of her shoes bumped into the backs of my ankles. This had to be the single most inefficient way to walk in the history of mankind.

“Hanashiro, are you afraid of the dark or something?” I asked as we clumsily shuffled along. She didn’t respond immediately. *Looks like I was right.* I had a hunch based on how oddly unsettled she’d been acting from the moment we met up tonight.

“Yeah, so what? You got a problem with that?” she finally admitted, albeit rather defensively and with a fair bit of venom in her tone.

“Nope, I wouldn’t judge you for that. I was curious, that’s all. Though you seemed pretty okay with it the last couple times we came in here,” I recalled, thinking back on when she had first tailed me here and the time after that. I hadn’t noticed her being spooked whatsoever in either of those instances.

“Well, yeah. That was during the daytime. It was still light outside, so it wasn’t entirely impossible to see in here. That’s the only reason I could hold it together. Now that it’s nighttime, though, all bets are off. It’s pitch-black outside, it’s pitch-black in here. Like, what if both our flashlights died? I think I’d have a panic attack.”

“Wow, it’s really that terrifying to you?”

“Yes, stupid. If anything, you’re the weird one for being totally unfazed. How can you not feel suffocated when the darkness closes in on you? Swallowing up everything else around you, the pressure slowly building as it dissolves your world step by step…?”

As she carried on muttering in fear, I suddenly felt like I had a moral responsibility to do something. After all, I was the schmuck who’d told her to let go of my hand because it kinda hurt, while from her perspective, she was confronting one of her greatest fears and just looking for anything to cling to in order to feel more secure. How had I not made that connection sooner? I was a pathetic excuse for a man, let alone a friend.

I took a deep, quiet breath, then reached back and firmly laid my hand on top of Anzu’s, holding it tight. It tensed and trembled in fright for a moment, but then quickly clasped mine right back. The whole thing couldn’t have lasted more than three seconds, and neither of us said a single word—but the unspoken emotions conveyed between us in that moment were deeper and more intimate than any she and I had shared before. It

didn’t take long before I started to feel extremely awkward and embarrassed about what I’d done, though. I made a desperate attempt to resuscitate our previous conversation so we could both stop lingering on it.

“I’ve gotta say, I’m a little surprised; I was starting to think you weren’t afraid of anything at all, to be honest. Did some traumatic event inspire your fear of the dark or what?”

“Yeah. When I was in elementary school, I got in a fight with one of my classmates, and they shoved me in a locker and locked me inside. Been afraid of dark, claustrophobic spaces ever since.”

“O-oh. I see.”

Somehow, I’d already made things awkward again. I didn’t know why I’d thought past traumas might make for a lighthearted conversation topic in the first place, but this was definitely heavier than I’d bargained for.

“I wasn’t being bullied or anything, for the record. It was just a rare case of me picking a fight and losing, really. I eventually figured out how to open the locker from the inside, then went and whacked the hell out of the kid that locked me in there with a broom, so I still got the last laugh in the end.”

“Ha ha. Now that sounds more like the Hanashiro I know.”

“Is there anything you’re afraid of, Tono-kun?”

“Sure there is. I probably couldn’t list ’em all off the top of my head, but there’s plenty of stuff that scares me.”

“Okay, then what’s your number one greatest fear?”

“Number *one*? Hrm, let me think…”

It was a tough question. Obviously, I could rattle off a number of different things that terrified me, but trying to rank them in order was the real hard part. Getting eaten by a shark, getting mauled by a bear, earthquakes, contracting a fatal disease… Pretty much anything that the average person would fear, I was afraid of too. I supposed the main thing that connected these things was that they all related to a general fear of dying, or the concept of death itself. That was also a primal, instinctive fear embedded in all living things, though, so it didn’t really feel unique to me

specifically. What was I, Kaoru Tono, more afraid of than anything? Was it something to do with death?

The death of a loved one, probably.

“Yeah, I dunno. Nothing’s really jumping out at me, sorry.”

“Really? Huh.”

Anzu sounded slightly miffed by this boring response, but I really didn’t want to darken the mood by delving into even heavier territory. Still, I was pretty sure the answer I’d come to was the right one, even if I wasn’t going to say it aloud.

“Hey, check it out.” I pointed ahead as I caught a glimpse of light coming from deeper inside the tunnel, presumably from the torches on the wall. We were fast approaching the torii. Anzu and I ran the rest of the way at a brisk jog. Once we made it to the first torii, I turned off my flashlight and slipped it back into my pocket—we wouldn’t need it from this point on. Now that we had a reliable light source again, Anzu slowly released her grip on my shirt as well.

“All right,” I said, gulping down a mouthful of saliva. “Now comes the hard part.”

We had a time limit of only two minutes. Once we passed beneath the first torii, we’d run as far as we could in one minute, then spend the remaining minute coming back. I set my cell phone’s stopwatch function to make sure we didn’t lose track of time.

“Okay, we’re all set. Just tell me when.”

“Ready when you are,” Anzu said. Her expression was stern, but there was a hint of hesitation in her voice. Yet she didn’t seem to be afraid—the defiant spark I saw in her eyes as she stared straight down the throat of the tunnel was one of dauntless curiosity and determined aspiration. There was clearly no need to worry about her.

“Cool. When I say go, then,” I declared, putting one leg out leaning forward into a standing start position. My clenched palms were slick with sweat. “On your mark, get set… Go!”

I pressed the Start button on the timer, and we both took off running, with me taking the lead. The torii whooshed past one after another as I dashed down the corridor, going at about eighty percent of a full sprint. Given that Anzu had handily shown up every girl on the track team, I was pretty sure she'd have no trouble keeping up with me no matter how fast I went. As I started breathing harder, I looked at my phone to see that only ten seconds had passed. Still no exit in sight. I shot a quick glance over my shoulder to see how Anzu was doing. She seemed to be managing just fine, so I picked up the pace a bit.

The timer hit twenty seconds, then thirty. Outside, it would be tomorrow afternoon. So far, there hadn't been a single change of scenery in the tunnel—just torches and torii as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly, a familiar question popped back into my brain. Just what was Anzu trying to gain from the Urashima Tunnel, anyway? She and I had talked quite a bit over the past few days, yet still I had no idea what wish she wanted the tunnel to grant for her. It wasn't constantly gnawing at my brain, mind you, nor did I think it was necessarily any of my business, but I did feel like it would be a good idea for us to be on the same page in that regard—especially if there was any risk of it obstructing the investigation going forward. I decided to make a point of asking her as soon as we made it back out of the tunnel.

We'd almost reached the end of the first minute, and my legs were officially killing me. Just as I was looking down to check the time, however, I heard a loud rustling sound coming from ahead. Bringing my gaze back up, I saw dozens—maybe even hundreds—of sheets of plain white paper all fluttering to the ground, like a whirlwind of oversized confetti that had come absolutely out of nowhere.

"Whoa!"

One of the countless sheets came flying toward me like a flyer in a hurricane and slapped me right in the forehead, entirely covering my eyes so that I couldn't see a thing. I panicked helplessly for a moment before trying to reach up and peel the sheet off my face, but I lost my balance and fell crashing to the floor.

“Yeowch!” I shouted.

“Tono-kun?!” cried Anzu.

Finally, the paper drifted gently down from my face—just in time for me to watch my cell phone go skidding across the rocky tunnel floor. The inertia from the impact had made me lose my grip and sent it sliding like a curling iron nearly three meters away.

No! We need that timer! I scrambled onto my hands and knees and crawled over to pick it up. Luckily, aside from a little crack in the screen, the phone appeared to be mostly unharmed. *Phew, thank God… Wait, forget about that! We’ve gotta go!*

“My bad! C’mon, we can’t waste any more… Hanashiro?”

I was convinced I’d find her either already way ahead of me or standing by my side ready to help me up—but she was in neither of those two places. She was standing stock-still, right where I’d fallen, looking in disbelief at one of the fallen sheets of paper, which she now held in her hands. The rest of them lay in a scattered pile at Anzu’s feet. There had to be at least a solid hundred sheets.

“Hanashiro?” I called again, but there was no answer.

If the way her shoulders were heaving was any clue, she was on the verge of hyperventilating—though surely not merely due to exhaustion from the minute-long sprint (she was in much better shape than me, after all). Something definitely wasn’t right here. I got back up to my feet and ran over to her.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” I asked.

“But… But this is…” she muttered to herself in a daze, her voice trembling.

I wasn’t sure she’d heard me. Curious, I peered over her shoulder at the piece of paper. It had crude little characters drawn on it, separated into distinct panels like a comic book… It almost looked like some random kid’s hand-drawn manga. What in the world was this doing here in the tunnel…? It was a mystery, to be sure, but we didn’t have the time to stand around

contemplating it. I looked at my cell phone again: we'd passed the one-minute mark. A cold sweat trickled down my forehead.

"Hanashiro, we have to go back."

Still no response. She didn't turn her head to look at me. In fact, she dropped to her knees and started scrounging around on the floor, frantically gathering all the other sheets of paper.

"Hanashiro, stop!" I yelled, still to no avail. "What the hell are you doing?! We don't have time for this!"

"Just go on without me!"

"What?! Are you crazy?! I'm not leaving you here!"

"Well, I'm not leaving this here either!" she snarled at me. Her voice was feral and distressed, like a bloodthirsty animal with its leg caught in a trap. The sheer desperation in the way she struggled to gather them all made it abundantly clear that this was not the Anzu I knew. I realized very quickly that nothing I could say would convince her, and for a moment I considered trying to physically drag her out with me. But that would have taken far too long.

"Ugh, fine!" I growled.

I got on my knees and started to help; it seemed like the best possible option left. As soon as the pages were gathered, we both got up and sprinted as fast as we could back the way we'd come. We couldn't afford to waste a second checking the time—we just ran and ran until we were safely on the other side of the torii and back to where time flowed naturally.

"Whew… I'm *beat*, man…"

I had to fight incredibly hard to resist the urge to let myself collapse on the ground right then and there, but I somehow managed to hold it together and wait until we were fully back outside. As we approached the exit, the interior of the tunnel grew brighter and brighter, and we were greeted by a gradual crescendo from the local cicada choir. The moment we stepped out of the tunnel's shade and onto the parched grass, we were assaulted by the brutal midday sun.

I looked at my phone: it was 1 p.m. on July 16th. We'd entered the tunnel on the night of the 12th, which meant we'd been in there for more than three and a half days. Yet even after sacrificing that much time, we still had no idea how far the tunnel went. All we'd gleaned from that entire experience was that it had to be longer than three hundred meters.

Or, well, I suppose we did find one other thing. I looked at the stack of papers in my hand. Then I blinked, and in the next moment, they were gone.

"Wha…"

Anzu had snatched them away at the speed of light. Whatever these papers were, she clearly didn't want me to see them, and as a result, I caught only the most fleeting glimpse of their contents.

"Hey, uh… Hanashiro?" I asked as she turned her back to me. "What exactly are those?"

"…nothing…"

"Sorry? I can't hear you. Turn around and speak up a little, why don't you?"

Anzu didn't budge.

"Hellooo…?" I said. Still, no response. Getting impatient, I grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around myself. However, when I saw her face, I froze.

Anzu's eyes were watering. She was crying. As I stood there at a loss for words, she rubbed her eyes dry with her wrist and swiftly regained her composure.

"It's nothing important. Don't worry about it."

"C'mon, now… You can't expect me to believe that."

Surely if the papers weren't that important, she wouldn't have been crawling on the ground trying to collect them like a rabid animal. From what I could tell, the papers themselves didn't seem to be torn up or deteriorated in any way, so there was no way some random person had thrown them out inside the tunnel years and years ago—especially

considering the inexplicable way they'd come fluttering from the ceiling. My guess was that they were another of the tunnel's "impossible" finds, like Karen's sandal and our old pet parakeet had been for me. But why a bunch of sheets of paper? And why was Anzu crying over them?

"Is that what you were wishing for?" I asked.

"No," she replied.

"Then what is it? Just tell me straight, I promise I won't judge."

"There's no point in explaining it."

"You don't know that. For all we know, it could give us a major clue toward solving the tunnel's mysteries."

"…I promise you it won't."

Anzu's voice shook ever so slightly. Clearly there was some reason she didn't want to tell me, not under any circumstances. I wondered if she would crack if I said her unwillingness to be upfront could present a major obstacle to the investigation…but I decided to let it go. Sure, maybe me knowing would give us a new lead to pursue, but if it would only come at the cost of driving a wedge between us, it wouldn't be worth it. That kind of distrust might obstruct the investigation too, after all. However, there was one question I still wanted to ask.

"Then what is it you *are* after? What wish do you want the tunnel to grant?"

"I…" Anzu began but then stopped short—almost like the words caught in the back of her throat. A good ten seconds passed before she finally managed to stutter out the rest. "…I'm not sure yet, actually. I guess I figured I'd find out somewhere along the way."

"Wait, seriously…? You're risking years of your life without even a concrete goal in mind?"

"Oh, I have a goal in mind," she fired back. "I want to be someone. Someone extraordinary."

"Uh… Okay? In what way?"

“I mean, think about it—a mysterious space where the flow of time itself turns fragile, but with the promise of granting any wish? What more extraordinary experience could there possibly be than venturing into a place that bends the laws of the universe?”

“I’m not sure having extraordinary experiences makes you an extraordinary person, though.”

“That’s where you’d be wrong. It is *precisely* what makes people extraordinary.”

Now my head was starting to hurt.

“But *why* are you so obsessed with being ‘extraordinary’?” I demanded, rising to my feet as my patience grew thin.

Suddenly, Anzu looked lost and confused, like a child who’d become separated from her mother at the supermarket. In fact, I’d never seen her look so vulnerable before. Then, after a few moments of hesitation, she answered calmly:

“When I was thirteen years old, my grandfather passed away.”

A warm breeze blew by. The leaves rustled overhead. A twinge of regret shot through me like a rush of adrenaline, and I bit down softly on the inside of my cheek. “…Sorry.”

“No need to apologize.”

“I take it the two of you were pretty close…?”

“Not really… Barely knew the guy. Can’t even remember what he looked like now.”

“Oh, uh… I see…”

“It still terrified me,” she explained. “The way he died, yet nothing changed. Like, shockingly little was different. Sure, a few people shed tears for him at his funeral, but I can guarantee none of those people were still crying about it a week later. Death comes for us all in the end, and we kind of just have to accept that in order to cope through life until we ultimately kick the bucket ourselves. Not like denying the human condition will keep the reaper at bay, after all. Then once you’re gone, any traces of you ever

having been alive will slowly fade away and be swallowed by the sands of time. With very, *very* few exceptions, every single person alive today will be long forgotten even just two hundred years from now. That's what my grandfather's death made me realize."

Her tone gradually grew more and more imperative.

"It's pretty distressing, don't you think? The thought of dying and leaving nothing behind. The world not changing one iota from your having been in it. Makes you wonder what the point of living in the first place is, you know? Like, why are we even here? Why bother putting in all the effort to live if only to suffer and die and be forgotten? That's what makes the thought of being ordinary so terrifying to me. That's why I'm so determined to *be* someone. Someone who'll be remembered. Who'll actually leave an unforgettable mark on this world. Someone extraordinary."

I was stunned. Speechless. Anzu had gone from zero to full-on existential crisis in no time flat. This wasn't the sort of thing I could respond to with a noncommittal "Yeah, I hear ya," or "Couldn't have said it better myself." I had to respect the sincerity with which she'd chosen her words and respond in kind.

I thought about what I could say. I thought long and hard, but nothing came. My mind was blank. There was nothing I could think of that seemed a fraction as meaningful as what Anzu had said. I supposed that made sense; she'd probably spent months or years developing this personal philosophy of hers. I couldn't expect to come up with an equally poignant rebuttal in a mere few seconds… Yet I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge (and thus tacitly endorse) that worldview either. So I floundered, and I said the stupidest thing imaginable.

"Boy, you sure can talk a lot when you're passionate about something, huh?"

Was I the dumbest man alive? Quite possibly.

"…Wowww. Really? That took a lot of courage for me to say, you know." Anzu glared at me with narrowed eyes. "I've never told anyone that before."

“S-sorry,” I apologized in a panic. “It was just kind of a lot, and I didn’t know what to say, so I kinda…”

“It’s fine. Still felt good to get it off my chest. Do you at least see where I’m coming from now? When I say that’s why I want to explore the Urashima Tunnel?”

If I were to answer honestly, I’d have said that yes, I understood her point of view. However, I couldn’t relate to it whatsoever. I felt no desire to be someone special or famous like she did. I mean, the unstated implication of her little philosophy was that anyone who lacked greater ambitions was lazy or a failure, and what was so wrong with being average? Why waste your whole life struggling to leave a lasting mark on the world when you wouldn’t be around to see it anyway? Assuming freedom of choice existed, if people were content to live out simple lives, why should they aspire to be more? Who needed the dramatic peaks and valleys between feeling artistically fulfilled one moment and then being depressed the other ninety-nine percent of the time when you were in a creative rut? Life was too short, and if being one of the sheeple meant you could maintain a stable level of happiness throughout, what was wrong with that?

That said, I obviously had no right to decide whether Anzu’s reasons for wanting to explore the Urashima Tunnel “passed muster.” Regardless of whether I could accept her motives, she doubtless had no intention of giving up the investigation, even if she had to do it without me. Her willpower and initiative were plain to see. To be clear, I didn’t want to part ways with her either, regardless of our opposing values. So I knew exactly what it was I had to say.

“…Yeah. There’s no doubt in my mind anymore that you’re dead serious about this.”

“You mean it?” Anzu pressed. I nodded decisively, and her face relaxed into a smile. “Well, okay then.”

It seemed all was forgiven. Yet a vague sense of guilt ate away at me. I had to really fight hard to resist the urge to break eye contact with her.

We only ended up being able to attend sixth period that day. Needless to say, Ms. H gave us quite the earful when we finally stumbled onto campus. Honestly, I wasn't sure why we'd bothered showing up. I let out a loud, bellowing yawn in the middle of class, and the math teacher instantly shot me a dirty look, so I ducked my head down in submission. It was 2 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon, but as far as my body clock was concerned, it was still sometime in the early hours of the morning after Friday night; trying to stay awake and pay attention to the lecture was an uphill battle, to say the least. I twirled my pen in my right hand as I tried to fight off yet another yawn. None of the lecture material was registering in my brain. All I could think about was the Urashima Tunnel.

Two key aspects defined the legend of the tunnel: one, it affected the flow of time, and two, it could grant any wish to those who enter it. The former we'd confirmed to be true, but the latter still remained to be seen, and it was starting to make me anxious. My wish certainly wasn't to be reunited with a dead pet, or my sister's sandal, and if Anzu was to be believed, those sheets of paper weren't what she was truly after either. That begged the question: On what conditions did the tunnel manifest things like that? Did it grab meaningful objects from a person's memories and project them at random? No, there had to be a method to the madness. In my case, it was almost like it took my real wish and taunted me by granting me all sorts of things which were closely related, but never the one thing I truly wanted.

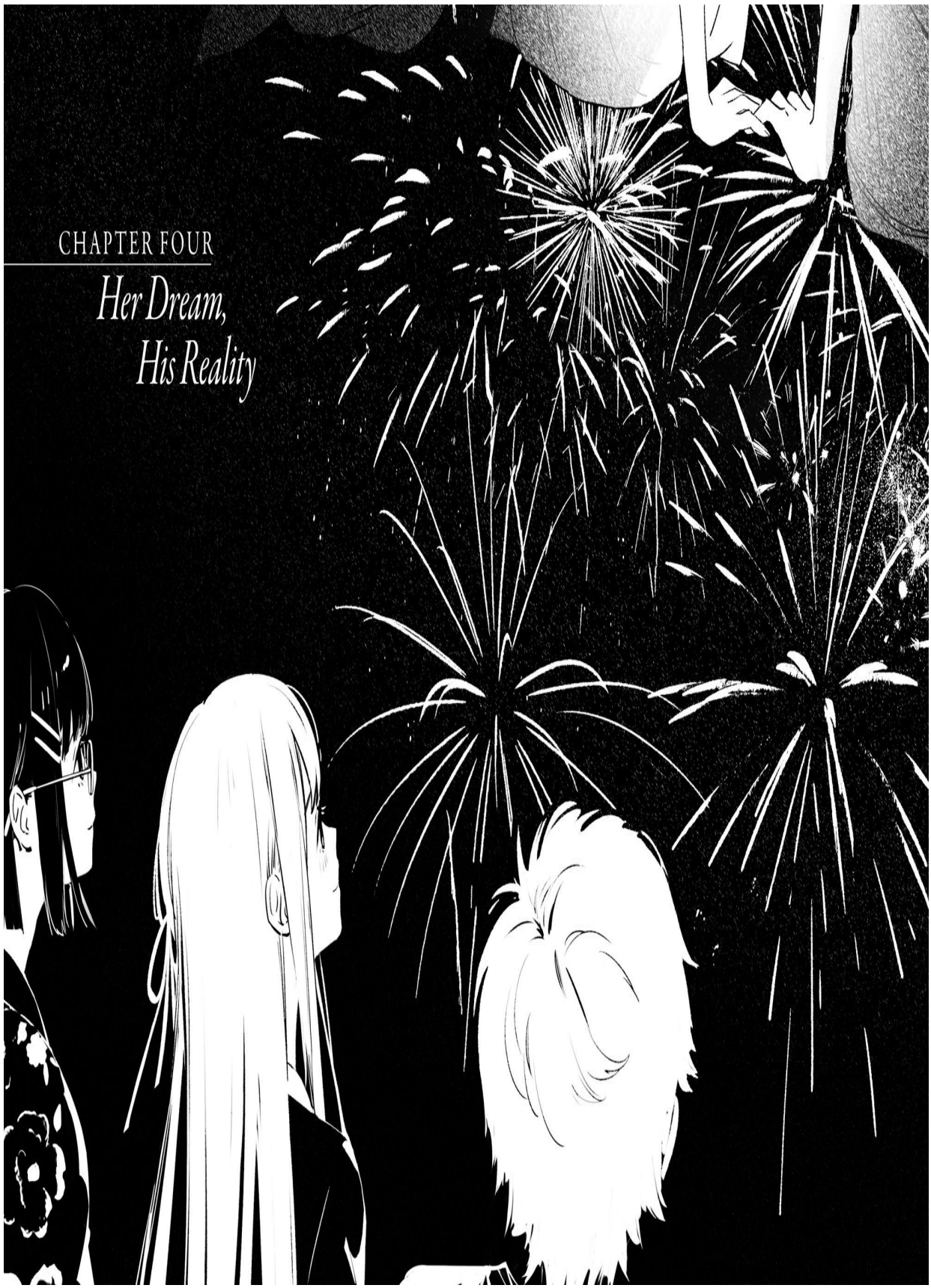
I was suddenly reminded of the tale *The Monkey's Paw*. It was a short horror story that I'd been assigned to translate for my junior high English class. The basic premise was that whoever held the titular paw would be granted three wishes, but only in a roundabout way that exploited loopholes in the wisher's phrasing. It was essentially a genie's lamp but much more devious. For example, a man and woman who used it to wish for a large sum of money would be granted the sum, but only as a settlement after their son was killed in a horrific accident at his workplace the next day. Then when they wished to bring their son back to life, they'd get a knock on their front door from his mutilated, decomposing corpse.

In a way, perhaps the Urashima Tunnel's wish-granting mechanics functioned similarly to the monkey's paw, albeit without the evil twist. On second thought, maybe there was a certain malevolence to it. I mean, it had waited until I was about to turn back before it made Karen's sandal appear in front of me, which seemed a little too perfect. Then the same thing had happened with Kee, our parakeet. It was almost like the tunnel was summoning bait to lure its prey (in this case, me) deeper inside.

Thinking back on it now, from an objective standpoint, it really did seem like I was walking straight into some sort of trap. Though if there were malicious forces at play behind the Urashima Tunnel, then what if it twisted my wish like the monkey's paw and gave Karen back to me, but only in a strange and disturbing way…? I didn't want to consider the possibility.

Trying my best to shake that unsettling thought from my head, I glanced up at the calendar written in chalk on the blackboard. Summer vacation was fast approaching.

OceanofPDF.com


CHAPTER FOUR
Her Dream,
His Reality

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 4:
Her Dream, His Reality

THE REMAINING DAYS before summer vacation came and went in the blink of an eye. Once the end-of-semester assembly was over, we returned to the classroom to pick up our report cards, then were free to go by lunchtime. About half of my classmates quickly filed out of the classroom to go home or to their respective club meetings. The other half remained, comparing report cards as they made plans and gushed excitedly about all the fun things they were going to do over summer vacation. Beach. Barbecue. Fireworks. All the usual suspects.

As for me, however, I sort of just sat there in a wistful daze for a while, watching the action play out from the sidelines. When I considered that this could very well be the last time I sat in Classroom 2-A, I got surprisingly emotional, and I couldn't bring myself to rise up from my desk.

As I scanned the room, my eyes happened to land on Koharu's old friend group. The Haneda girl had taken over as leader of the pack, and they all seemed to be chatting it up as blithely as ever.

Meanwhile, Koharu, who used to be right there in the center of them all, was far off in a different corner of the room, meekly packing her things so she could go home. Yet to my surprise, instead of heading straight for the classroom door, she walked over to speak with Anzu, who was also getting ready to leave. They then pulled out their cell phones and had a brief exchange before smiling pleasantly at one another and filing out of the classroom. I could only assume they'd traded contact info.

Seeing their departure as my own cue to leave, I finally scooted my chair back to stand up, but I didn't get that far before Shohei called out to me from behind.

"Hey, Kaoru. You got plans this afternoon?"

"Nope, not really. Why, what's up?"

“Me and some of the guys from calligraphy club were gonna go grab a bite to eat. You wanna come with?”

Just as I was about to politely turn him down, I stopped myself. There was a very good chance that this would be the last time I ever saw Shohei as well. In that sense, maybe it *would* be a good idea to take him up on this offer and hang out with him one last time, just in case… Then I thought about it some more and realized that it wasn’t a good idea anyway. I wasn’t a part of the calligraphy club, so an outsider tagging along would just make everyone else feel less comfortable letting loose.

“Sorry, man. Think I’ll have to pass.”

“Wow, you actually waited five seconds before answering this time. You were seriously considering it, weren’t you?” Shohei teased. Damn, he was sharp. “C’mon, dude. No need to be shy. The other guys won’t bite, I promise. They’re pretty chill.”

“Nah, I really shouldn’t. I’m broke as a joke right now.”

“Well, I don’t mind buying for ya on account of you being the newcomer to the party!”

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t feel right about that. Don’t worry about me. You guys go have fun. I’ll see you around, man,” I said, putting an end to the conversation as I stood up to walk away.

“C’mon, dude. Don’t be like that,” said Shohei, grabbing me by the arm. I could almost feel a question mark pop up over my head. He was being surprisingly persistent today. “You’re way too young to be such a grumpy old hermit. These are the best years of your life, bro. You’ve gotta go out and enjoy ’em while you still can.”

“There’s no guarantee I’d enjoy myself.”

“Well, sometimes just putting yourself out there is important too.”

“What is this, the elementary school marathon? I’m not looking for a goddamn participation trophy, man,” I snapped. Then, realizing I was getting worked up for no reason, I cleared my throat and tried to calm down a bit. “Look, I appreciate the free counseling session, but I really don’t need

the advice. I'm not looking to reinvent myself, man. I'm just trying to maintain the status quo."

"Oh yeah? Then how come you've been missing class so much lately?"

Now that gave me pause. I hated making people worry about me, and Shohei had never been so obviously concerned. I felt truly bad having to dissemble and shrug off his good intentions, but I couldn't tell him the truth. The Urashima Tunnel was a secret between me and Anzu, not to be shared with anyone else. Telling Shohei would mean betraying that mutual trust, so I chose to swallow my discomfort and keep quiet.

"If you don't wanna tell me, that's fine. I will say this, at least," Shohei began, leaning in close as though he was about to grab me by the collar. "Unless you wanna waste your whole life away, you've really gotta learn to step outside your comfort zone, dude. Stop obsessing over what you have to lose and start thinking about what you have to gain. Just my two cents."

"…I'm not obsessed," I said, gently pushing him away. "Besides, nothing's ever lost forever. There's always a way to get it back."

Shohei looked utterly perplexed by this response, like he couldn't begin to comprehend the words coming out of my mouth. I decided to take my leave before he had a chance to ask me what I meant.

"Well, see you in September," I said on my way out.

Shohei let out a sigh of resignation. "…Yeah. Don't flake on me next semester, dude."

It was the first day of summer vacation, and I was waiting for Anzu outside the Urashima Tunnel once again. It was another scorcher of a day—hot enough to make someone go insane—but thankfully this time she strolled up at 1 p.m. on the dot, just like we agreed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said as she descended the stairs, and I waved to greet her. She was wearing long sleeves and pants despite the searing heat, and had a wide-brimmed sun hat on for good measure. Though

in all fairness, she was certainly well dressed for the occasion, considering our objective today was not to explore the tunnel itself but the mountainous woodlands all around it. The idea was that every tunnel had both an entrance and an exit, so unless the “Urashima Tunnel” moniker was a massive troll, we should hypothetically be able to find where it bottomed out somewhere on the other side of the imposing hill it ran beneath. That was our main goal for the day.

“You really think we’ll find it, though?” I wondered aloud. “I mean, it’s gonna be pretty tough to scour this entire mountainside.”

“If we can’t find it, we’ll dig a new tunnel straight into it from the side. Boom. Free shortcut.”

“…Wait, huh?”

“I’m kidding.”

Whoa. Hanashiro, making a joke? Never thought I’d see the day.

“Obviously, I’d never suggest something that reckless,” she clarified. “I mean, what if it caved in and we got trapped inside? Not that I wouldn’t consider it as a last resort if the investigation proves too difficult down the line, I guess—but for now, trying to find the other exit is our best bet from the standpoint of both time and effort.”

“How would we even do that, anyway? Rent an excavator or something?”

“Potentially. How much do you think that would run us?”

“I genuinely could not tell you.”

Even if we did manage to rent one out, how the hell would we transport it all the way out to the tunnel? *Maybe we should nip this idea in the bud and get down to business.*

“So how are we doing this, then?” I asked.

“I think for starters, we should do a full loop around the circumference of the mountain. I think you’re probably a more seasoned hiker than I am, so why don’t you take the lead, big guy?”

“Sure thing, city slicker. I’d be happy to show you the ropes. C’mon.”

With that, we made our way to the unmarked trailhead.

We called off the investigation after a mere two short hours. Reason being: we'd underestimated the mountain. Underestimated its might. We had figured that since it wasn't particularly densely wooded, we'd be able to tackle it without too much trouble, but that had been a major miscalculation on our part.

However, the biggest reason for our ultimate failure was that we didn't have a clear-cut destination in mind. If we were just going from point A to point B, that would be one thing, but since we were looking for something in particular with no clue as to where it might be, it meant we had to go over every patch of the hillside with a fine-toothed comb to make sure we didn't accidentally overlook it, which was straight-up exhausting.

At first, it felt like a fun challenge, like we were hiking to a pleasant picnic at a scenic viewpoint. However, after one too many spiderwebs to the face, and one too many close calls tripping over giant roots, the conversations died off, and in the end, we got stranded; we even lost track of the way from which we'd come. By the time we finally made it back to the entrance of the Urashima Tunnel, we both looked like we'd just crawled out of a horror movie.

"Well, so much for that idea. Sorry," Anzu apologized as she peeled yet another spiderweb from her hair.

"Nah, I should've known better too… Honestly, I feel like we should call it a day after this, even if it is only three in the afternoon."

"Yeah, agreed. I need a shower, ASAP…"

Thus we made our way back up the stairs to the railroad tracks, both of us more than ready to head home. Just then, I had a horrifying realization. I reached down and patted the pocket of my jeans, but I felt nothing. I frantically reached my hand inside, but alas, it was completely empty.

"What's wrong?" asked Anzu.

"I think I must've dropped my house key somewhere…"

“Uh-oh. Are you gonna be all right without it?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a spare back at the house. But I’ll be locked out until my dad gets home, so I guess now I’ve gotta find a way to kill a few hours…”

Thankfully, he usually didn’t come home nearly as late when he went in to work on his day off, so I’d hopefully only have to wait until about 8 p.m. or so to be let back in the house. Not that there were any guarantees.

“Well, in that case…!” Anzu blurted out, her voice squeaking anxiously. Her face was bright red, and something told me it wasn’t from all the sun we’d gotten today. Then, after an excruciating pause, she offered her suggestion in a softer, more timid voice:

“Do you…wanna come over to my place?”

The condominium where Anzu lived was relatively close to downtown. After passing through the auto-locking entry door, we made our way to the impeccably sanitized inner hallway. While I’d never mention this aloud, it was clearly several tiers more luxurious than Koharu’s housing complex. Eventually we came to a stop outside a door, which I assumed to be Anzu’s unit—but then I noticed that the name on the door wasn’t Hanashiro. Then I recalled what she’d told me the day she beat up that senior punk: Anzu had no parents. I was very glad to have remembered this minor detail before I asked about it.

She unlocked the door, and I followed her into the entryway, where we bumped into an older woman, probably in her early fifties. Her pepper-gray hair was tied in a bun, and a couple of reusable shopping bags hung from her arm. It seemed we’d barged in just as she was getting ready to go shopping. Anzu stopped to greet her, albeit in a rather formal way for someone she was supposedly living with. I kept that thought to myself and simply bowed my head along with her.

“Is this a friend of yours, Anzu?” the older woman asked, looking at me with what appeared to be genuine surprise on her face. Then, as if remembering a prior commitment, she gasped, bringing one hand up to

cover her mouth. “Oh, goodness! Where are my manners? Let me pour you two some tea before I go…”

“Don’t mind us,” said Anzu, shaking her head. “By all means, go run your errands.”

“Are you sure…? Well, all right, then.” The woman squeezed past us and headed out the door.

“This way,” said Anzu, beckoning me farther in. She stepped up into the hallway, and I followed after her.

“That was my aunt, by the way,” she explained before I had the chance to ask. “Her husband passed away two years ago, and her daughter’s living on her own now too. Hence why it’s just me and her at present. Though if you’re wondering why I was being so formal with her, it’s because we don’t talk an awful lot. We’re less like family and more like roommates.”

“Huh. Interesting living situation, I guess…”

“You go on in.” Anzu opened the door at the end of the hall and gestured me inside. “I’ll be right back.”

She trotted off into another room, her footsteps beating in a pleasant rhythm against the hardwood flooring. A few moments later, she returned with a rolled-up washcloth and a drinking glass.

“Okay, here’s some iced tea and a wet towel.”

“Hey, thanks.”

“I’m gonna take a quick shower. Feel free to wipe yourself down with that in the meantime.”

Anzu pressed a button on a little remote control to turn on the AC, then left me alone in the room once more. Unsure of what to do, I sat on the floor and took a sip of my iced tea. Then I unraveled the wet washcloth and used it to wipe my face and neck as I looked around the room.

Right off the bat, the main thing to stick out to me was the massive bookcase that nearly covered an entire wall. On its shelves were all manner of different books, ranging from classic literature to popular pulp manga, all

neatly organized by publisher. It was a perfect display of Anzu's detail-oriented personality. The next thing I happened to notice was her writing desk, which was the only part of the otherwise immaculate room that was remarkably untidy. Books were stacked atop it in uneven piles, and eraser dust was strewn all across the surface. Other than those two details, however, it was about as spartan and unspectacular as Koharu's bedroom had been. I had to wonder if they were exceptions to the norm, or if my lack of personal experience had merely given me some bizarre notions as to what a teenage girl's room should look like.

After finishing my initial survey of the room and fully wiping myself off, I was officially bored. That was a bit of a problem, because it felt pretty flustering being alone in a girl's room with nothing to do, as a guy who'd never really had any female friends. Even sitting there absentmindedly was a challenge, because my mind kept getting distracted by the vaguely sweet feminine fragrance that seemed to only exist in girls' bedrooms. Thinking I might read a volume of manga or something to keep myself occupied, I got up and walked to the bookcase. Surely Anzu wouldn't object to me pulling one out to entertain myself, would she? Luckily, she happened to have a copy of a particular manga I'd been meaning to check out, so I went ahead and pulled it out from the stacks.

"Hm?"

It was then that I noticed an envelope, wedged between the top of the manga volumes and the bottom of the next shelf up, almost like it had been hidden away. Curious, I reached to pull it out. Printed on the corner of the front of the envelope was an official company name and logo: "Yutosha Publishing Co." The seal had been broken, but obviously I wasn't about to go rifling through someone else's mail. Just as I was about to slip it snugly back into place, my hand froze.

Wait a minute. Isn't Yutosha, like…a pretty major book company?

Then all of a sudden, the image of Anzu on the ground desperately gathering those pages of drawings flashed back into my head. *Could it be?* My better judgment tried as hard as it could to quell my rabid curiosity, but in the end, the latter came out on top. With trembling hands, I gently pulled the letter from the envelope and had a look.

“…Well, holy crap.”

I heard the doorknob twist as Anzu let herself back into the room. “Sorry that took so long… Wait, are you reading my—”

“Oh, yeah. My bad. I was getting pretty bored, so I kinda helped myself.” I was sitting on the floor with my back against her bed, leafing through one of her many volumes of manga. “Should I have asked first?”

“No, you’re fine.”

In her lacy camisole and matching lounge shorts, Anzu was showing a lot more skin than I’d ever seen on her, to the point that being in the same room was making my heart race. When she walked over and sat right beside me, it only worsened my nervous tension. I set the manga I’d been reading on the low table and tried to start a conversation in a feeble attempt to keep things from getting weird.

“Boy, you sure read a lot of manga, don’t you?”

“Yep, I sure do. Does that surprise you?”

“Maybe a little, yeah. I mean, I’ve only ever seen you read normal books at school.”

“Wow, you must pay a lot of attention to me.”

“Yeah, well. You’re the one who refuses to blend in like a good little conformist. Not my fault you stand out.”

This got a good laugh out of her, which did help me loosen up a bit. We went on to make casual small talk for quite some time, gushing about our favorite movies, books, foods, and so on. We whiled away the warm, sleepy hours of the late afternoon—each passing minute feeling lazier than the last—as time trickled by like honey, slow and sweet.

“To be honest with you, I actually do still have parents,” she suddenly confessed, not long after we finished talking about our most nostalgic childhood video games. “I mean, it wasn’t a lie in the sense that they’re not a part of my life anymore, but I still feel bad for misleading you. Truth is, my mother and father are both still living in Tokyo. They were always

extremely strict, though, and I guess a rebellious daughter like me was too much for them to handle. So, they tossed me overboard in the hopes that living with my aunt on this deserted island for a while would make me change my ways."

"Uh, you do realize we're still connected to the mainland here, right?"

"It was a metaphor. Don't think too hard about it."

I could only laugh and shake my head. Kozaki wasn't even that remote, all things considered. But whatever.

"I always hated my parents," she went on. "The way they treated me like I was mentally deranged for wanting to pursue my dreams and make a name for myself, just because it wasn't a 'stable' career path like the boring, worthless ones they decided to waste their entire lives on. I'll never forgive them for that. But you know what's really sad? When they told me they were sending me away to live in Kozaki, I took it way harder than I expected. Like there was still some lingering affection there I couldn't shake, no matter how much I told myself I hated their guts. I'm such a stupid brat."

Anzu shook her head in self-reproach.

"Anyway, yeah. So as you can imagine, I was still pretty torn up about the whole situation by the time I got here. Felt like I was kinda at the end of my rope, and it made me act a lot more reckless than I should have. I mean, I'd been in my fair share of fights before, but I'd never had a guy slap me across the face, then start kicking me in the stomach before. To be honest, I was about ready to break down and cry before you and your friend showed up… Do you remember what you said to me back then? When I told you I didn't have any parents?"

"Yeah. 'Lucky you,' right?"

"You got it. The words fell right out of your mouth, no sympathy or spite to them whatsoever. When I heard that, I was like, 'Dang, this guy must have been through *a lot*. He's *way* farther along in life than I am.' That's the real reason I followed you to the tunnel after school, by the way.

I had to know what could ever happen to a person to make them say such a thing like it was nothing at all."

"…Huh. Never would've guessed."

"I know this is probably a really, really inconsiderate thing to say, but…I kind of look up to you for that. For all the stuff you've been through, I mean. Some people go their whole lives without developing that kind of character depth. It's what makes you so interesting, Tono-kun. It's why I can't help but gravitate toward you."

I felt a gentle weight as Anzu leaned her exposed shoulder against my upper arm. The fragrance of her freshly shampooed hair drifted into my nostrils and sent my synapses running wild.

"Hey… Look at me."

I slowly twisted my head to the side and met Anzu's upturned gaze. Flushed cheeks. Shimmering eyes. Glossed lips. Her larynx bobbing ever so slightly as she gulped down the very last of her inhibitions.

"Tono-kun, I… I think I…"

"Hey, Hanashiro," I interrupted, cutting mercilessly into her unfinished thought like a butcher's knife through a squirming fish.

"…Yeah? What is it?" she asked, clearly miffed that I'd ruined the moment.

Then, without missing a beat, I blurted out, "Are you writing your own manga?"

For a moment, it looked like Anzu couldn't process what I'd said. She looked so puzzled that I began to worry that maybe I'd gotten the wrong idea entirely. Those concerns quickly proved to be unwarranted.

"Wait… How do you… Huh?!" Anzu sputtered, her entire body trembling as her mouth opened and closed repeatedly like a goldfish. Her flushed face turned even brighter red, and her eyes shot open so wide, I thought they might pop right out of their sockets. Her face became a

jumbled mess of potent emotions—one part confusion, one part embarrassment, and one part disbelief.

“H-h-how…?” she pleaded, desperate for an explanation.

“When I went to borrow a volume of manga from the bookcase, I noticed an envelope sticking out. Wondered what it was, so I peeked inside and saw some sort of manga evaluation sheet. You know, like the type you get when you submit an original work to a publishing contest.”

Anzu let out a terrifying grunt and pounced on me, grabbing me by the collar. Given that she was already leaning against me, there was no room for me to shake her off, and so I fell backward onto the floor beneath her weight.

“How could you invade my privacy?!”

She was now straddling me from above, slamming the back of my head into the hardwood floor as she shook me by the shoulders. The force from the impact jostled one of the straps of her camisole from her shoulder, exposing a portion of her bra. I averted my eyes in panic.

“I got curious, that’s all…” I answered sheepishly.

“Y-you can’t go d-digging through other p-people’s mail!”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry. But seriously, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed! I’m *livid*!”

Yikes. I knew she’d be pissed, but not *this* pissed. I had to run damage control, stat. “No, really! I think it’s super cool! Especially since it looks like you got pretty high marks too. And based on the little summary blurb, it sounds right up my alley. I’d love to read it someday.”

“Wha…”

All of a sudden, the shaking stopped, and Anzu let go of my shoulders. I slid out from underneath her, then pushed myself up so that I was sitting directly across from her.

“I noticed your desk is covered in eraser shavings; are you still working on things? Do you have anything finished you could show me?”

“What? No… None of my stuff is good enough to show other people…” Anzu mumbled, her previous indignation crumbling into bashfulness at the drop of a hat. It was kind of cute, actually.

“If you’re entering your work in contests, I assume you want to be a manga artist, don’t you? In that case, you’re definitely gonna want to get feedback from other people. C’mon, please? I promise I’ll give you my honest impressions.”

“It’s so embarrassing, though…”

I had her on the ropes. *One more push ought to do it.*

“Please, I’m beggin’ ya! I wanna be able to say I read Anzu Hanashiro’s breakout hit before she was famous! Hell, I’d pay you for the privilege of reading it!”

“Hnnnnngh…”

I couldn’t tell if that sound meant that Anzu was flattered, conflicted, or annoyed, but regardless, she crawled on all fours over to her writing desk and pulled a stack of papers out from one of the drawers. She then duckwalked back over to where I was sitting and held them out to me with both hands as though they were some sort of certificate or diploma.

“Here,” she said. “This is my newest one… I just finished drawing it. You can read it if you really want to, I guess.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

“J-just don’t go in expecting too much. I can tell you right now it’s gonna seem really, really amateur compared to all the big-name professional stuff you probably read…”

“Well, I’m stoked to check it out regardless. Thanks.”

I reached out and accepted it delicately with both hands, trying to show her manuscript an equal level of respect. Right off the bat, the cover art was extremely eye-catching and impressive; you could have told me it was being sold in stores, and I wouldn’t have batted an eye. I knew you should never judge a book by the cover alone, but it certainly gave me high hopes that the contents would be good enough to match. Eager with anticipation, I turned to the first page.

Silence fell over the room. The total lack of any other sound made the whirring white noise of the AC unit feel much louder than it actually was. The entire time I was reading, Anzu looked extremely on edge. She was constantly fiddling with her hair, adjusting her seating posture, and being generally restless all around. Amused by this new and adorable side of the invulnerable girl I thought I knew, I stole furtive glances at her every time I turned the page until she got mad at me and told me to focus on the story. I apologized in earnest and did as I was told from that point on.

No more than five minutes later, I was finished reading the manga. If I had to give it a genre, I'd file it under sci-fi. It was the story of a lone girl in a post-apocalyptic world who went on a journey across the land searching for other survivors.

"…W-well? What did you think?" Anzu asked gingerly, the trepidation plain to hear in her voice. She was sitting upright on her knees in formal seating posture. As promised, I gave her my honest review.

"I thought it was really, really great!" I exclaimed, holding up the manuscript in awe. "I found the main character to be *super* likable and compelling. Especially in that last scene, where we find out she's actually an android who *thinks* she's human. The way it hits her so hard at first, but she gets back up and continues her search for survivors regardless—that part really resonated with me. Oh yeah, and I also love how much foreshadowing you peppered in throughout to kind of hint at the fact she was an android all along. I didn't pick up on it at all on my first pass, but now I really want to read it again to see what else I missed. It was definitely a real page-turner, that's for sure. Loved every minute of it."

"You… You did?!" Anzu replied, her voice squeaky and ecstatic.

"Yeah. If you told me this was a one-off story in some major weekly manga magazine, I wouldn't bat an eye. It's really incredible, honestly. I had no idea you were such a talented artist, not to mention storyteller. And the fact that you're already putting yourself out there and entering your stuff in competitions and whatnot is pretty—"

"Uh, s-sorry, could you give me a sec?" Anzu interrupted. She stood straight up, then dove onto her bed and buried her face in her pillow. At

first, I didn’t know what to make of this, but then she started rapidly kicking her legs up and down and squealing with glee.

“H-Hanashiro?”

All I could hear was the sound of her muffled elation. I didn’t know if she was trying to hide it or what, but I was glad to see that she was apparently quite pleased with my review. She went on kicking her legs like this at full speed for a good several seconds too, until finally, she stopped all at once as though her batteries had run out. She slowly twisted her body around, then sat upright and tried to collect herself. Her bangs were plastered to her forehead and frizzy from the static.

“…Welp, I think that’s enough happiness for the next five years,” she said.

“Ha ha. Guess it was a good thing you let me take a look after all! If you’ve ever got more stuff you want me to ‘proofread’ for you, just say the word. I think it’s definitely a good idea to get feedback if you’re aiming to do this for a living someday.”

“I mean, I’m not actually trying to be a professional or anything—I don’t put in nearly enough work to ever make it big. I just submit my stuff to competitions sometimes for the hell of it, and because I like the feedback…”

“Huh, really? That’s a shame. I think your work is pretty damn good already.”

“No it’s not…” Anzu mumbled shyly, turning to look away from me. She went crimson from ear to ear all over again. I waited for her to regain her composure, then dove right into my next question.

“So hey, I was meaning to ask you something.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“All those papers we found at the Urashima Tunnel before… Were those pages from previous manga you wrote?”

Anzu’s eyes widened a bit, though only for a second before she straightened her posture and nodded affirmatively. “Yeah, they were. All stuff that I wrote way back in elementary school.”

“Aha. So I was right, then…”

From the fleeting glimpse I got at the time, I had been fairly certain that they were manga pages; I’d just had no idea what significance they might have held for Anzu.

“Sorry about that, by the way,” she said. “I acted pretty selfish back there…”

“It’s cool. What’s done is done. Though I *would* like to know what those pages meant to you, if you don’t mind telling me.”

Anzu let out a sigh of resignation, then answered in a soft, meek voice. “They’re all my old stories that my parents threw away.”

“Wait. They tossed your artwork in the trash?”

“Yeah. When I was ten years old, I got in trouble for drawing in the middle of class, and then my folks found out during parent-teacher conferences. They told me to stop wasting my time on stuff that ‘wouldn’t help me amount to something in the real world,’ then made me watch as they threw everything I’d drawn up to that point in the garbage.”

“…Ouch. That’s pretty harsh.”

“I poured so much time and effort into every one of those pages. I bawled my eyes out and got in a huge fight with my parents. From then on, I made a point of continuing to draw as much as I could out of spite, right where they could see me doing it. I never told anyone else about it, but I refused to give up on manga, no matter what. Honestly, that was where all of my issues with them started, and what ultimately led to them cutting me loose and sending me here.”

“Damn…”

This was pretty heavy stuff. Now I understood why Anzu had gone so feral trying to gather those pages in the tunnel. I had to respect her determination, though, continuing to draw manga because it was what she loved to do, even when her parents vehemently disapproved. I found that kind of passion to be quite noble.

“But I mean, if you really love making manga that much, I don’t see why you felt the need to hide it from me in the first place. Especially

considering you're so good at it."

"It's *because* it means so much to me that I didn't want to share it with you."

"Huh. Is that how being an artist works?"

"At least for me, it is," Anzu said, biting her lip. There was a long pause, and then she shifted gears: "…But why would my old manga show up inside the Urashima Tunnel?"

"What do you mean? Probably because you wanted it back, I assume."

"Huh… Did I want it back, though?"

"Don't ask me. How should I know?"

"To be honest with you, I'm not one hundred percent sure myself. Like, obviously I wasn't going to just leave my old manga there in the tunnel, but as for whether I'd been harboring some deep-seated desire to get it back all these years… Yeah, I'm not so sure about that."

"Really? Huh…" I replied noncommittally, leaning against the bed as I looked at the ceiling. Then all of a sudden, I felt an epiphany coming on, and I let out a tiny gasp. Anzu looked over at me, mildly startled. Hell, I was pretty startled myself, to be honest.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Oh, uh. Nothing," I lied. "Don't worry about it…"

Meanwhile, my brain was whirring at light speed. There was something there, like a faint, glimmering light at the bottom of a fathomless void. *Think, Kaoru.* I knew it had to be something important. It felt like I'd finally gathered all the pieces I needed; I just had to find the right way to connect them, trying different combinations until something clicked. After racking my brain for a good while, I finally found the deduction I was groping for: everything we'd found in the Urashima Tunnel thus far had one thing in common. It was never things we found ourselves actively wishing for, it was only ever things from our past that—

Before I could finish that thought, I heard the sound of the front door being unlocked in the hallway. Evidently Anzu's aunt had returned from her shopping trip. I looked up at the wall clock and saw that it was 7 p.m. I decided it was best not to tell Anzu my new hypothesis just yet. For one thing, it was still unconfirmed, and it would only make her go crazy with needless speculation.

"Well, I should be heading home," I said, standing.

"Oh… Well, okay…" said Anzu, slumping her shoulders.

Ugh, don't make that face. Now I feel bad.

"We should decide when we want to meet up at the tunnel again, though," I suggested. "Any ideas as to what we should investigate next?"

"No, I've been thinking it's about time to call off the investigations, actually. I mean, I can't think of anything else we really need to look into," she said, then straightened her shoulders and looked me dead in the eye. "No more test runs. I think we're finally ready for the real deal."

"Meaning…?"

"It's time to get your sister back, and make me someone extraordinary. We're gonna go in there and not come back out until we've both had our wishes granted."

I gulped down the saliva that had pooled in my mouth. So it was finally time, then.

"Do you have a date in mind?"

"Yep. I'm thinking August 2nd."

"All right. Sounds good to me… Why the 2nd, specifically?"

"No real reason… Just thought it'd be smart to give ourselves a good several-day buffer beforehand, that's all."

She had a point; there were a lot of preparations we'd need to make —not just in terms of what we'd need to take with us into the tunnel, but also in terms of being prepared for what might happen when we came back out. We agreed to settle on the particulars via text later, and with that, Anzu

walked me to the entryway, where I slipped on my shoes and opened the front door to leave.

“All right. Guess I’ll see you later, then.”

“Hey, um… Tono-kun?”

“Yeah?”

Anzu looked like she was mustering her courage to tell me something, but she faltered in the end. “…Sorry. It’s nothing important. Get home safe, okay?”

“Will do. See ya.”

As I turned to close the door behind me, I caught one last glimpse of Anzu’s face. She looked just the slightest bit crestfallen, and a pang of guilt tugged at my heartstrings.

The week before the day we planned to venture into the tunnel, I was spending the morning happily vegging out in my bedroom when I got a text from Anzu.

“Kawasaki invited me to go to the festival with her. Any interest?”

This time of year, she could only be referring to the annual fireworks festival held in the next town over. It was the biggest local event around, with people coming in droves from all over to see more than six thousand individual fireworks lit in one gigantic spectacle of a show. I’d been there a few times myself, back when Karen was still alive, but I hadn’t realized it was the day. Though to be crystal clear, my interest in going was less than zero. I loathed big crowds.

I began to type a reply to Anzu’s message: *“I think I’m good, but thanks.”*

All that remained was to hit send, yet my fingers froze in place. Two lingering doubts gave me pause. The first was based on the way Anzu had phrased it: “Any interest?” as opposed to something like “Wanna come with?” Maybe I was reading too much into it, but it almost made it sound like she wasn’t all that interested in going if it was just her and Koharu, and

would only accept the invite if I agreed to go as well. Knowing what Koharu had been through recently, I didn't have the heart to turn her down, especially when she was already trying so hard to rebuild her social life from the ground up. The second reason I hesitated, though, echoed the feeling I got when Shohei asked me to get lunch with him and the calligraphy club guys—that this might be my last opportunity, so I shouldn't let it go to waste.

"Man, I dunno…" I grumbled, rolling around restlessly on my bed. Then I heard the sound of the bathroom door opening downstairs. It was my father. I didn't know why he was home on a weekday, but he was. Maybe it was to make up for some prior holiday that fell on a weekend, or maybe he'd used a day of paid time off. Either way, I didn't want to interact with him whatsoever.

"…Guess that settles it."

I deleted the message I'd composed and typed a new one: *"Sure, I'd be down. Where and when do you guys wanna meet up?"*

I hit send before I had a chance to second-guess it. There was nothing I hated more than having to deal with my father, so I figured I might as well go and at least try to have fun. Although in that case, I needed to get cleaned up so I could head out at a moment's notice. I went downstairs to the living room, where I found my father seated on a floor cushion watching some mindless TV show. I took a deep breath before calling out to him.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hm? What is it, Kaoru?"

"I'm going out for a bit tonight."

"Oh, uh… I see. How late do you think you'll be?"

"I'll be home before midnight, don't worry."

"You gonna need dinner?"

"Think I'll get something while I'm out and about."

"Fair enough. Have fun."

I nodded, then headed straight back to my bedroom. *Holy crap.* I couldn't believe I'd had an actual, civil conversation with my father without things immediately devolving into an argument. Though come to think of it, he'd been in awfully good spirits the vast majority of the time lately. Usually, he barely acknowledged my existence, but he had just asked me about dinner and even told me to have fun. He hadn't said anything remotely like that to me since before Karen died. After our last stint in the Urashima Tunnel—when I told him I'd be staying at a friend's house over the long weekend, then come back a day late—he hadn't said a word in complaint. I tried to imagine what might have brought on this sudden change of heart; maybe something good had happened to him at work? I thought about it for a moment, then shrugged it off. It wasn't worth overthinking.

Just as the evening sky began to bleed from light orange to deep vermilion, I arrived at the bus stop where Anzu had suggested we meet. Usually, it was rare to see even a single senior citizen waiting around for the bus there, but since it was the night of the festival, there was actually a pretty long line of people at the stop, some of whom wore traditional summer yukata and jinbei. Anzu and Koharu weren't among them, which came as a surprise given that the shuttle was supposed to arrive in five minutes. Concerned, I began scanning the vicinity, when suddenly I felt a clap on my shoulder. I turned around, and there she was: Anzu, in a breezy periwinkle sundress.

"Hey. Been waiting long?" she asked.

"Nah, just got here myself."

"Cool. No sign of Kawasaki yet?"

"Nope. Guess she might be running late… Oh, wait."

Just then, I spotted her, coming down the opposite sidewalk in traditional festival garb. As soon as she noticed us, she hurried toward us across the street via the crosswalk, her wooden sandals clacking against the pavement the whole way. She looked pretty cute in her soft-pink yukata,

which was embroidered with a goldfish pattern, but her face quickly twisted with disgust the moment she saw me.

"Ugh. What are *you* doing here, Tono?"

Wait, did Hanashiro really not tell her I was coming?

"I invited him," Anzu explained. "Figured the more, the merrier."

"Oh, is that right? Well, if Anzu invited you, I guess it's fine…"

"Anzu?" I asked.

"She insisted on giving me a stupid nickname now that we're friends," Anzu explained, clearly not enthused by this development.

Aha. So they were on a first-name basis, then. Or at least one of them was. I smiled. "Glad to see you two are getting along so well."

I meant it too. However, Anzu evidently interpreted this as teasing sarcasm, because she smacked me hard on the shoulder. Not long after, the bus arrived, and the three of us climbed aboard. It was already pretty packed, but we luckily managed to find two side-facing seats along the window for Anzu and Koharu (though I had to remain standing). The automatic doors closed, and the engine chugged to life as the bus set off toward its next destination.

"So hey, how do you like my yukata?" Koharu asked Anzu.

"What do you think, Tono-kun?" Anzu asked, passing the ball to me.

Gee, thanks a lot.

"I, uh…th-think it looks pretty good, honestly?" I stammered.

"Then I'm inclined to agree," Anzu declared.

"…You guys are totally dating, aren't you?" Koharu glowered at me suspiciously.

Neither Anzu nor I said a word in denial.

The light changed, and the bus driver slammed on the brakes, causing me to lose my balance from the sudden change in momentum. I would have gone careening down the aisle if I hadn't quickly grabbed one of the overhead straps and regained my footing. *Phew, that was a close call.*

Even so, Koharu gave me a look and shook her head with a disapproving sigh. “God, what do you even see in this loser, Anzu?”

“Why are you calling him a loser?”

“I mean, no offense, but he’s kind of a scrub. Not much of a personality, no real skills or sense of humor, and it’s not like he’s all that attractive eith—”

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Anzu cut in, her tone cold and sharp like an ice pick.

“Urk… A-all right, fine,” Koharu winced, shifting her attention back to me. “Then what was it about Anzu that first caught *your* eye, Tono?”

“Wait, huh?!” I spat out, flummoxed.

“Ooh, yeah. I’m pretty curious about that too,” said Anzu.

Now they were *both* looking up at me expectantly. I was officially cornered.

“I mean, it’s pretty hard to put that sort of thing into words, y’know…? Plus, you’re kinda putting me on the spot here…”

“What, you can’t think of anything?” said Anzu, furrowing her eyebrows dejectedly.

Dammit. Now I really had to pull something out of my ass, or it’d only come back to bite me later. I racked my brain and tried to come up with the safest, least corny answer I could throw together on such short notice. “…Well, if I had to pick one thing, then I guess it would be, uh…”

“C’mon, pal,” Koharu pressed. “We don’t have all day.”

“Her…scent, maybe?”

Koharu’s face twitched as she recoiled into defense mode, clutching her upper arms with both hands as though her stranger-danger senses were ringing alarm bells in her head.

Okay, yeah. Definitely could have chosen a better way of phrasing that.

“Ew, what?! I asked what caught your eye, not your *nose*, you disgusting creep. Is that your rubric for a girl’s attractiveness? Their *smell*?! Great, now I feel like I need a shower. Ugh.”

“N-no, no!” I frantically waved my hands back and forth. “You’ve got it all wrong, I swear! I don’t go around sniffing random girls or anything, I promise! Even with Hanashiro, it was just a coincidence.”

“Oh reeeally? How does one ‘coincidentally’ get a big ol’ whiff of someone, wise guy? Just what kinds of fun little activities have the two of you been getting up to lately?”

“Oh, get your head out of the gutter. It’s nothing like that… C’mon, Hanashiro. Throw me a bone here,” I pleaded.

Anzu wasn’t paying attention; she was too busy sniffing her own arms with a pensive, worried look on her face.

“I have a scent?” she muttered to herself.

We hopped off the bus and strolled toward the festival grounds. It was dark at this point, but fortunately for our purposes, there wasn’t a single cloud in the night sky—perfect weather for a fireworks show. The fireworks themselves were going to be set off from the other side of the big river, whereas all of the spectators had to stay and watch from the side where all the food stands and whatnot were lined along the river walk. It was a short trek from the bus stop to the festival grounds, so we could hear the hustle and bustle of the crowd enjoying the festivities even amidst all the loud exhaust noise from cars idling on the roadway. After crossing the street and walking a little ways, I caught a whiff of something cloyingly sweet, like castella sponge cake.

“So did you two have anything specific you wanted to do at the festival?” I asked as we ambled down the sidewalk.

Anzu shook her head.

“Yeah, me neither,” said Koharu. “Though I did want to go fishing for bouncy balls at some point before we leave.”

“Oh, yeah? Cute. I used to love doing that when I was, like, five.”

Koharu looked confused for a moment, and then her face went bright red. “Wha… N-no! It’s not for me! It’s for my little brothers! They asked me to bring home one of those big squeezy ones with the spikes all over it!”

Oh yeah, I remember those things. Had one for like a week before it got a big hole and deflated into a worthless plastic husk.

“Aw, that’s nice of you,” I said with a smile. “Y’know, you seem like a surprisingly good big sister, what with the way you still play cards with them and whatnot.”

“Hey! What do you mean, ‘surprisingly’? …Oh yeah, that reminds me! Do you have any siblings, Anzu?”

“Nope. I’m an only child.”

“Wow, that’s cool. I always wanted to be an only child.”

“Really? I always kind of wished I had a little brother or sister, personally.”

“Ha ha, no… Trust me, they’re nothing but a hassle. Always pestering you to play with them, or to be the chaperone whenever they want to go someplace… And oh God, don’t even get me started on having to take baths together…”

“W-wait, that’s a thing?”

I found it kind of rewarding to see Anzu having a normal conversation with someone who wasn’t me. It was hard to believe how sociable our scrappy rebel had become lately. I felt like a proud parent watching their eldest child go off to college as I followed the pair at a safe distance, not wanting to interrupt their lively discussion.

As we got closer and closer to the center of the action, the crowds grew a fair bit denser. There were a lot more food stands in this area too, as evidenced by the savory scents of deep-fried food and yakisoba sauce hanging warmly in the air. Before long, I heard the sound of someone’s stomach growling loudly; it was like a sound effect straight out of a cartoon.

“Wow. Excuse you, Kawasaki…” Anzu said with a teasingly judgmental glance.

“Oh, no, no, no! Don’t lie! That was *you*, not me!” said Koharu, placing her hands grumpily on her hips with a big harrumph.

Wow. Did Hanashiro really just try to gaslight Kawasaki? What is this, elementary school? Even from a distance, I could tell that it was really Anzu’s stomach that had growled.

“If you’re getting hungry, we can stop and grab food somewhere,” Koharu offered. “There’s still plenty of time before the fireworks start.”

I checked my phone. It was now 7 p.m., and the show didn’t start for another hour. We agreed to take our time perusing the different food options as we continued down the riverwalk. After passing several booths, Anzu stopped dead in her tracks in front of one, peering in at their display of grilled squid with curiosity and awe.

“Whoa, is that just, like…a whole squid, grilled up and impaled on a stick…?”

“Yes, Hanashiro… That’s why they call it grilled squid on a stick. Or wait—have you really never seen that before?” I asked.

She nodded. “I mean, I’ve seen it on TV a few times, probably, but I’ve never really been to a festival or anything before…”

“Wow, no kidding?”

I supposed they probably didn’t have too many traditional-style festivals in Tokyo proper. Either that or she’d never had anyone to take her to one growing up.

“Have you had one of them before?” she asked. “Do they taste good?”

“Yeah, they’re great. Why don’t you get one and see for yourself?”

“Ugh. I’m tempted, but I’ve been really craving takoyaki too…” she whined, clearly torn.

“Well, why don’t we get both, then?” Koharu chimed in. “There’s a takoyaki stand right over there. I’m getting pretty hungry, myself, so I’d be happy to go wait in line for it.”

“Really? Could you buy enough for both of us, then?”

“Sure thing!”

Anzu handed her some cash, and Koharu went click-clacking off in her wooden sandals to the takoyaki stand. Meanwhile, Anzu had placed her order for a grilled squid with the elderly man running the booth. When my nose picked up the tantalizing scent of Worcestershire sauce nearby, I started getting hungry too, and I remembered the yakisoba stand we’d passed on the way.

“Hey, I’m gonna go buy myself some yakisoba real quick.”

“Okay. If Kawasaki beats you back here, we’ll be waiting in the dining tent.”

“Copy that.”

I spun around and walked back the way we’d come. Luckily, there wasn’t a long line, so I managed to get in and out with my yakisoba pretty quickly. Grand total: four hundred yen. When I got back, Anzu had vanished from in front of the grilled squid stand, so I took a peek inside the dining tent, where sure enough, I found my two companions seated and digging in. I got there just in time to see Anzu sink her teeth into the squid for a big honking first bite; she seemed to really enjoy it. I looked around for a place for myself to sit, but the tent was a small, cramped space between two food stands, with only three two-seater benches for people to sit on, all of which were currently occupied. Resigning myself to eating while standing, I was about to take my first bite of yakisoba when Anzu stopped me.

“Hey, wait a minute. Kawasaki, could you scoot a little that way?”

“Sure, how’s this?”

“Great, thanks. Come have a seat, Tono-kun.” Anzu patted the barely thirty-centimeter space now open beside her. I thanked her for her thoughtfulness and sat. It wasn’t exactly comfortable, but it beat standing, and for that, I was grateful. Though the fact that our shoulders constantly rubbed against each other did put me a little on edge.

I opened the plastic takeout container that held my yakisoba and dug in with my chopsticks, slurping the thick noodles one by one. They were

utterly drenched in sauce, which might have made them a bit too rich for some, but I loved it.

“Hey, Tono-kun!” Anzu tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to look and saw that she was holding a piece of takoyaki on a toothpick toward me with a big old grin. “Open wide!”

“Er, no thanks. I’m good…”

Koharu gave me an instant death glare from over Anzu’s shoulder, as if to say *“You eat that goddamn takoyaki right now, or else.”* Fearing for my life, I caved to peer pressure and opened wide to let her shove the whole thing straight into my mouth.

“Oh God!” I yelped with my mouth full. “Iss so hod! Hodhodhodhod!”

The girls burst out laughing. At least *someone* was having fun at the expense of my melting taste buds. I tried my best to roll it around inside my mouth like a hot potato as I suffered through each painful bite before finally gulping the molten ball of lava down my throat. It felt like my tongue was bleeding by the end.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself,” said Anzu, coming down from a massive giggle fit. “But it was Kawasaki’s idea, for the record!”

“Hey, most guys would kill to have a pretty girl like you feeding them! Be sure to savor each and every bite, now!” Koharu snickered.

I honestly couldn’t savor much of anything given how flaming hot it had been, but I nodded submissively nonetheless. I proceeded to quietly work through about half of my yakisoba until eventually, Anzu stood up and offered to go buy us drinks.

“Want me to come with?” Koharu offered.

“No, that’s okay. If two of us leave, we risk losing our spot. I’ll go by myself.”

“You sure? Well, okay. I’ll have a Cheerio Cola. Or any cola, if they don’t have that.”

“I’ll take a bottle of Lifeguard, if they’ve got it,” I added. “Otherwise I’ll have the same thing as her.”

“Got it. Be back in a bit.” Anzu turned to walk out of the tent.

“Man, she’s changed…” Koharu said once she was gone.

“For real…” I nodded, actually agreeing with her for once—hell, maybe for the first time in history. “Though I’d say you’ve changed just as much, if not more. I mean, you’re like a totally different person now.”

“Yeah… I know. Believe me, you’re not the first to notice. Things sure have been different around here since Anzu showed up,” Koharu mused affectionately.

She wasn’t wrong, though I still thought her personality shift was by far the biggest shake-up Anzu’s school transfer had wrought. It remained to be seen whether Koharu would truly be happier with her new self in the long run, but at the very least she’d matured an awful lot in a considerably short amount of time. If it were me, I’d certainly prefer people think of me as a kindhearted person rather than a terrifying one.

“…I’m really grateful to her, you know. I hope that someday I can repay the favor.”

As I watched Koharu gaze up at the roof of the tent with reverent admiration in her eyes, my chest panged with melancholy, which I quickly attempted to shake off by diving headfirst into my remaining yakisoba.

A moment later, Anzu returned to the tent, and the three of us made casual small talk as we enjoyed our drinks together. Once we had a touch more room in our stomachs, we bought a piece of castella sponge cake and split it three ways. We’d utterly forgotten about the upcoming fireworks until we heard the first shot go whistling into the sky outside.

“Aw, crap,” said Koharu. “The whole riverside’s probably packed by now. We’d better hurry, or we’re never gonna find a spot to sit.”

We crammed the rest of the sponge cake into our mouths and washed it down with our respective drinks, then threw our garbage in the trash can on our way to the river. Just as Koharu had foretold, the embankment was heaving with people. It wasn’t so packed that there wasn’t room to stand,

but the whole hillside was covered in blue tarps with families and friend groups sprawled out on top of them. We wove through the throngs of people, searching for a place to sit down, until finally we managed to find a small open spot just large enough for three. Koharu pulled her own checkered picnic tarp from her tote bag and spread it on the bare earth. It was clearly only designed to seat two, but we easily managed to make it fit all three of us.

After settling in, I looked at the night sky with anticipation, eager to finally see some fireworks. Before long, there came a thunderous boom, followed by reverberations so intense, they could probably defibrillate a person's heart. Then came the crackle and the flash as the glittering trails of falling gunpowder painted a technicolor dreamscape across the night sky. The vivid starburst seared its triumphant shape into our retinas, then drooped lazily downward before finally fizzling out into the darkness. Then came the next one, and the next, each splaying new spectrums of color onto the jet-black canvas.

"It's beautiful…" I heard Anzu whisper beside me.

Another rocket whistled into the sky, though this one was followed by a long pause before it finally exploded into shimmering vapor trails that wriggled out from the center like tiny fish swimming frantically upstream. The crowd *ooh*ed and *aah*ed as the golden branches came zigzagging down to form the shape of a weeping willow. Next came a gigantic flower, blooming brilliantly as it was joined by dozens of smaller supporting fireworks. This was succeeded by a wall of classic two-tone peonies, their color-changing pistils zipping away like honeybees from the hive before falling limp and cascading like waterfalls. Next on the agenda: a bombardment of fast and frenetic star-mines.

Something soft rubbed against my right pinky. Anzu had slid her hand right next to mine. Normally, this alone would have sent my heart racing and turned me into a nervous wreck, but in this moment, for whatever reason, all the right moves came naturally. I slid my palm over the tarp to take her hand in mine, and our fingers effortlessly intertwined. Though our hands were cold at first, the exchange of body heat helped us keep each other warm.

Then came the grand finale, as the biggest and boldest fireworks of all lit the night sky in striking colors, illuminating our faces in warm and ever-changing hues. It was a dreamlike vignette plucked straight out of a storybook ending.

"Whew! Man, that was good!" Koharu stretched her back as we meandered up the riverwalk. Now that the main event was over, we were ready to head home. The crowds had thinned quite a bit, though the food stands and other attractions were still going strong. The various vendors shouted out their offerings in an attempt to lure a few last customers as people filed out of the festival grounds.

"Excuse me! I'd like to buy a turn, please!" Koharu called out, handing two hundred yen to the attendant at the bouncy ball fishing stand. He took it and plopped a tiny paper scoop in her hands. She knelt in front of the big water tank, rolling her sleeves back as she psyched herself up to fish out some bouncy balls like nobody's business. "All right, let's see if I can get a hundred in one go this year!"

"Is that possible?" Anzu asked, looking genuinely perplexed.

"Oh yeah. I'm a pro at this. Ain't nobody ever scooped more balls than me. I've been undefeated since elementary school!"

I thought you swore you were only doing it to bring back a souvenir for your brothers, I wanted to say, but I held my tongue.

"Huh… I've never done it before, personally," said Anzu.

"Wait, seriously? Then why don't we do it together?! Excuse me, sir! Could we get another scoop over here? …All right, now watch closely—there's a trick to it, see. Before you do anything else, you're gonna want to dip the paper in the water, 'cause that'll—"

As Koharu hyped Anzu up to go fishing for bouncy balls, I massaged my eyelids with my thumb and forefinger. It seemed staring at all those bright fireworks for an extended period of time had given me a headache, because both my eyes and brain were throbbing in pain. It would probably be a good idea to head home and go straight to bed as soon as they were

done with their little kid's game. Pinching the inner corners of my eyes, I took a deep breath and turned my head toward the sky—when all of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of a woman passing by in my peripheral vision.

To be clear, all she did was casually walk past me. Yet something about her put my brain on high alert.

I turned toward her as she walked away. She was wearing a yukata and had her hair tied up on the back of her head. I couldn't tell much else from behind, not even how old she was. Yet for some inexplicable reason, this crazy impulse in my head told me I needed to get a better look. Before I knew it, I was chasing after her, sprinting as fast as I could so as not to lose her in the crowd. The more I closed the distance between us, the more the strange emotions inside me began to take on clearer and more discernible shapes.

Devotion… Dependence… Déjà vu… Nostalgia?

Then the woman stopped, turning to speak with the forty-something-year-old man who stood beside her, and I finally got a look at her face.

"Wha…"

I had to rub my eyes and do a double take.

It was my mother. The woman who'd thoroughly disappeared on us five years prior. But *how*? How could she be here? No, perhaps that was the wrong question. After all, it wasn't as if she had died. She just woke up one day and decided to walk right out of my life without ever looking back. She didn't even handle the divorce paperwork herself; she made her parents take care of that. Nevertheless, I obviously should have known in the back of my head that there was always the possibility that I would run into her somewhere.

More importantly, who was that man beside her? Was he her new partner? They seemed to be having a good time together, anyway. My mother was laughing. Enjoying herself. Content.

But what about me? What was *I* supposed to do? …No, it went without saying. I would not say anything, pretend I never saw her, and go home and forget about this. That was the right thing to do. My mother had

made her choice, and it wasn't my place to infringe on her happiness anymore.

Was I really okay with that? Walking away without trying to get closure on any of the unanswered questions she'd left me with? Like why she walked out on us, and if it was my fault, or if she ever loved me in the first pl—

All of a sudden, she turned toward me.

Then our eyes met, and for a moment, time stood still.

The bustling sounds of the festival grew distant.

Everything around us started flowing in slow motion.

Neither of us moved a muscle.

We simply stood there, keenly aware of one another.

She knew who I was. And I knew who she was.

An eternity distilled into a few, fleeting seconds.

Then it was over, and not a moment later, her face twisted in abject horror.

One of the corners of her mouth twitched with disgust, and her lips trembled as though she were about to cry out for help—like a prisoner who'd been thrown into a dungeon, locked up in a cage with a ferocious, bloodthirsty monster. That reaction told me more than words ever could. In her eyes, I probably did look like some horrible abomination, the very manifestation of her trauma that she'd spent the last five years trying to forget.

My brain sent out a distress signal to every one of my nerve endings, telling them to get me the hell out of there, *right now*. So I turned on my heel and attempted to walk away as calmly as I could.

I didn't know what I'd expected. For her to apologize for abandoning me? To tell me it wasn't my fault, and she didn't hold anything against me? No, I knew better than to get my hopes up. Yet somehow, it still felt like I'd been grossly betrayed. My legs began to quake. I was so dizzy, I thought I might faint. As I stumbled away, I bumped into several different people

walking in the opposite direction, a couple of whom yelled at me. To be clear, I could see where I was going just fine—it was only that my brain wasn't processing any sensory information whatsoever.

"Tono-kun?"

All of a sudden, Anzu was standing right in front of me.

"What's the matter? Why'd you run off? …Hang on. Why do you look so pale? Are you feeling all right?"

"Hanashiro…" I mumbled, walking to her with heavy, plodding footsteps. Then I threw my arms around her.

"T-Tono-kun?!"

I held her firmly in my embrace, squeezing her delicate frame as tightly as I could, skin touching skin, my chin hanging over her shoulder. I couldn't explain it—it was just something I had to do. I knew that if I didn't find something to hold, something to anchor me, I'd be dragged into the swirling vortex of emotions that now threatened to swallow me whole. The water was rising, and I needed her now more than ever. So, I held her close, so as not to be swept away.

At first, Anzu's entire body seized up in shock. Then, bit by bit, I felt her muscles relax, until eventually she let her guard down completely and accepted me into her universe. We stood there like that for a while, her holding me down as I took shelter from the storm in the comfort of her existence, my only source of warmth in the entire vacuum of space.

I don't know how long it lasted, could have been five seconds, could have been a full minute. However, when I finally felt calmed down enough to stand on my own two feet again, I pulled away…only to see that her cheeks were flushed pink, which made me start blushing up a storm as well. What the hell was I thinking, doing that right in the middle of a public space? The people around us probably thought I was some cringey lover boy who'd let myself get swept away by the throes of intense passion.

"S-sorry, I just… I don't know what came over me…" I stammered.

"Are you okay?" Anzu asked, her voice full of genuine concern.

Now that the heat of the moment had subsided, the embarrassment had gone, and in its place came a sense of newfound security and belonging. Like maybe there was a place for me in this world after all. Like maybe I'd be all right, so long as I had Anzu to keep me grounded.

"…Yeah. I'm okay now. C'mon, Kawasaki's probably getting tired of waiting."

"You sure you're all right…?"

"Yep. I'm all good, thanks to you. I owe you one."

As we made our way back to where Koharu was waiting, I said a silent farewell to my mother. I knew I'd likely never cross paths with her again.

On the shuttle ride home, the bus was virtually empty. The three of us sat side by side all the way in the back, me at the window seat, staring out into the night and offering only yes or no responses to Anzu and Koharu's attempts to engage me in conversation. I was officially ready for bed, and not just due to eye strain. If anything, my exhaustion was more mental than physical.

When I thought on that unfortunate encounter, I realized that I *had* expected something more from my mother. Maybe somewhere deep down, I'd always assumed she would return to us once she recovered from the trauma of losing Karen. I knew that was a pretty fanciful delusion on my part, but it at least explained why I felt so crushed.

I'd known from the moment my mother walked out on us that she'd never come back, and I thought I'd come to terms with that. Yet merely seeing her face had given me a resurgence of false hope. It seemed blood ties truly were the hardest to sever. Maybe it was that blood connection that had brought us together again, some invisible bond of fate. I liked to imagine that it was, because it gave me renewed hope that I might be reunited with Karen one day, given that she and I shared a far, far stronger bond.

…No. It wasn’t a matter of “might”—I *would* see Karen again. Someday very soon, in fact. Before the end of summer vacation, I was going to head deep into the Urashima Tunnel, and I wouldn’t return until I found her and brought her back. That was my mission: my obligation as her brother.

After seeing Anzu and Koharu off at the station, I took a ten-minute taxi ride home. When I walked in the front door, I saw a pair of white high heels I didn’t recognize sitting in the entryway. Apparently, my father had a guest, which was unusual enough on its own, but a woman? Now that was a first. I sneaked down the hall so as not to disturb them, but then the living room door opened and my father poked his head out.

“Oh, there you are, Kaoru! Was wondering when you’d make it home!” he grinned, his face so red and slack-jawed that I instantly knew he was drunk. He’d come home like this a lot lately, but today he looked especially bad. “Well, don’t just stand there! C’mon in and say hello!”

“Uh… Okay.”

I did as I was told and walked into the living room, where I made immediate eye contact with the woman sitting politely atop the tatami mat floor. She was a clean-cut young lady who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, and her whitish skin had an artificial sheen. She offered a pleasant greeting, which I returned in kind. I looked at the table and saw a big platter of catered sushi and a row of large beer bottles. Half the sushi platter had been picked over, and they’d gone through two of the beer bottles as well.

“Well, go on! Have a seat!” my father said.

“Sorry?”

“I said have a seat, my boy. Take a load off for a while.”

My father grabbed me by the shoulders and more or less forced me to my knees. He was making it abundantly clear that I had no say in the matter, but it was all so sudden that I couldn’t really fathom what was going on. My father sat beside me and put his arm around my neck with a giddy smirk. His breath reeked of alcohol.

“This is my son, Kaoru,” he said. “He’s a sophomore at Kozaki High.”

“Aww. He seems like a very well-mannered boy,” the woman smiled.

“Oh, he is. He can cook, do laundry—you name it. Only thing it seems he *can’t* do is shoot his poor old man a text when he decides to go AWOL, ha ha ha!” he chuckled heartily. “Oh, you know I’m just teasing, Kaoru. Hey—you hungry? Feel free to have as much sushi as you like! It’s all yours, son.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks…”

“This kid, I tell ya. Never been a very big eater. Though it saves me money, so I dunno why I’m complaining, ha ha ha!”

I just sat there in silence. My father’s words, his tone of voice, his mannerisms, his expressions—it was all so transparent. He was merely playing the part of a good father. Like a costume party that only he had dressed up for. Why was he trying so hard to give off the illusion that we had a good relationship? Why had he insisted I come join them? Who was this woman, anyway? She was clearly a fair bit younger than my dad, so why were they speaking so candidly with one another? Was she a distant relative? A co-worker? A friend? My mind was filled to the brim with all sorts of questions, but nary a single answer.

“Oh God, where are my manners? I forgot to introduce you!” My father removed his arm from around my neck. “Son, I’d like you to meet your new mom.”

…Huh? My “new mom”?

“I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while, but I’ve been so busy with work. I wanted to wait for it to feel right, you know? So, yeah. Sorry if this is all a little sudden, but that’s where we’re at right now!”

What do you mean, “that’s where we’re at”?

“Y’see, she and I have known each other from work for quite a while, but we only really hit it off about a month ago when”—“and so we met up for lunch a few times and”—“she’s been married once before too,

so”—“and then when you ran away from home that one time, she”—“emotional support, and”—

The words he was saying barely registered in my brain. My head spun like crazy. I was nauseous. What the hell was this crap? And on the same day I’d had a traumatic experience with my old mom, no less? Could I really not catch a goddamn break?

Yet the two of them happily carried on, totally undeterred by my lack of enthusiasm.

“Anyway, c’mon! Let’s have a toast!”

“Didn’t your doctor tell you not to drink so much?”

“Aw, it’s no big deal! Today’s a special occasion!”

“I don’t think that excuse would fly with him…”

“Quit worrying and drink with me, already!”

“Oh, for crying out loud…”

“God, we need to go out for *real* seafood again sometime soon.”

“Yeah, after things calm down at work a little bit, maybe.”

“Oh, I’m sure they will before too long.”

“I’d love to take a nice overseas vacation too.”

“Did I mention I’ve been saving up for a new car?”

“We’ll have all the time in the world once we retire.”

“Would be nice to take up some new hobbies.”

“Buy a nice little house somewhere.”

My old, cranky father and the woman he intended to forcibly instate as my new mother continued to paint their vision of their idyllic future together. I could already tell there was no room for me in that frame. After all, the only way to be a part of a family was to be born into it and thus connected by blood, or to love someone so much you wanted to start a new one with them. I had neither love nor blood ties with either of these two, so where the hell did that leave me in this equation?

“Oh, right, just so you know, Kaoru, we’re going to be moving out of this place sometime in the not-so-distant future.”

“…Wait, what?”

“I’ve got a new job lined up and everything,” my father explained excitedly, totally ignoring the clear displeasure drawn over my face. “We’re gonna get out of Kozaki and move into a nice condominium. It’ll be a little bit cramped compared to this place, sure, but things are gonna be a *whole* lot more convenient over there, I promise.”

The woman across from us nodded enthusiastically to emphasize the point.

“Oh, and don’t worry about your educational career. We’ll be able to sell this place for a nice chunk of change. Then we can afford to send you all the way through college, or whatever technical school you like. We can even set you up with enough money to rent your own place if you want to go somewhere farther away. The three of us are gonna have a fresh start together in a brand-new city, in a brand-new home.”

A fresh start.

“Isn’t that exciting, son? There’s a new life ahead of us, waiting just around the corner.”

I thought I felt a blood vessel pop inside my brain. The pores on my scalp flared, and my vision went red.

Piss off, old man. What about Karen, huh? You just gonna try to leave her in the past? Just gonna move on with your happy little carefree life and forget all about your only child of flesh and blood? You sicken me. How dare you not spend every waking hour of every day in misery and regret over what happened to her. How dare you not keep her in the forefront of your mind at all times. When you stop doing that, it really will *be like she never existed to begin with. Don’t you realize that, you stupid asshole?*

I wanted to grab one of those empty beer bottles and smash it over his head. I wanted to flip the table and punch a hole in the screen door. I wanted to give in to the rage inside and let it take control. All I could do was clench my fists and grit my teeth. I didn’t know how to actually act on

any of these urges, so the anger could only build inside me until it reached a breaking point. Then the fury toward my father turned into frustration with myself, until eventually I couldn't hold it in any longer, and the tears came gushing out.

"Whoa, what the… Kaoru? …Are you crying?" my father asked with concern, peering up into my downturned face.

Don't look at me, you piece of crap.

"What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?" asked the woman.

Stay out of this, you goddamn home-wrecker.

"…Oh, I see what's going on here." My father placed his hand on my shoulder.

I said, don't touch me.

"Don't you worry, Kaoru. I understand that you have a lot of reservations about this. It's a pretty big change. But I know the three of us can get through it if we work together. Can you try to do that for me, son?"

As I looked at his smiling face, full of newfound hope and aspirations, I finally understood. My father was determined to pretend like none of it had ever happened. Not Karen's death, not my mother leaving, not the horrible way he'd treated me—he was trying to leave all that emotional baggage in the past so he could go skipping off to find his happily-ever-after with his shiny new wife. Just like my mother seemed to be doing, judging from her horror at the mere sight of me. The two of them really were perfect for each other in that sense. Too bad they'd already divorced.

All at once, the red-hot rage that had been simmering in my head dropped to below freezing, and a chill ran down my spine. Only a moment later, my stomach churned.

Then I puked. All over the table.

The woman shrieked as the cascading river of light-brown vomit and half-digested foodstuffs dribbled onto the tatami floor. Even after I'd thrown up every last chunk of the yakisoba and sponge cake I'd eaten at the

festival, the taste of Lifeguard mixed with bile remained in my mouth as I continued retching every last drop of fluid in my stomach.

“H-hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” my father yelled, forgetting to maintain his loving parent act as he pushed me to the ground. As soon as my stomach was empty and I finally finished dry heaving, I got up and, without cleaning up my own mess, ran out of the living room, scrambled up the stairs, and locked my door. Finally safe in my bedroom, I wiped my mouth with a copious number of tissues, then climbed into bed and pulled the covers over my head. It was the only way to calm myself down, even if it meant overheating in a vacuum-sealed pocket of my own putrid breath.

I couldn’t help myself; it was simply too nauseating being down there. The stupid smug look on my father’s face as he talked wistfully about our future, and the way the woman hung on his every stupid word with rapt attention like he was some spellbinding orator delivering truly insightful wisdom—it was vile, and depraved, and disgusting all around. If I’d stayed there even a second longer, I would have done something I regretted. Hell, I was getting pissed again just thinking about it.

As I swallowed repeatedly in a vain attempt to use my saliva to soothe the burn of gastric acid in my throat, my cell phone buzzed in my pocket. Figuring it was my father telling me to come back downstairs, I rolled my eyes as I pulled it out to see whatever nonsense he’d sent. In actuality, it was a text message from Anzu.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. I had a really good time.”

That was all that she wrote. Yet funnily enough, it quelled the demons inside me and set my soul at ease. She really was my only safe harbor in this world. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to hold it together after what happened at the festival earlier if she hadn’t been there to support me. Never in my life had I let myself lean on another human being before—certainly not to the extent of breaking down and wrapping my arms around them, at least. Only Anzu had seen me at my most vulnerable, and I couldn’t possibly express how grateful I was to her for accepting me, even as the flawed screwup that I was. My respect for her was renewed after tonight, welling alongside a strange new emotion, an almost magnetic

affection that I couldn't resist. Anzu had officially cemented herself as an irreplaceable part of my world.

I replied to her text with a simple *"Same here,"* then drifted into a deep, murky sleep, still clutching my cell phone tightly in my hand.

August 1st, the day before our final expedition into the Urashima Tunnel. It was 10 a.m., and the cicadas were out in full force. I sat at my writing desk, composing a letter to my father that ultimately boiled down to "Hey, I'm running away from home, and I'm probably not coming back." I was mainly leaving it so my father couldn't get the police involved to look for me after I was gone, thinking I'd been murdered or abducted. By making my intent to leave clear in advance, they wouldn't have cause to launch a full-on search party for me. At least, that was what Anzu said.

My primary source of anxiety was that they might somehow track us to the Urashima Tunnel and unwittingly walk inside trying to find us, and there was no telling what problems that might cause. Worst case, we would be apprehended before we got our wishes granted, or they would seal off the tunnel and trap us inside. That was one possibility I *definitely* wanted to avoid.

Of course, that was only if my father managed to successfully request a search party, and even that was unlikely, so I wasn't all that concerned. I knew my father wouldn't try that hard to find me before giving up—and from what I'd heard about Anzu's parents, they wouldn't either. My father had become extremely bitter toward me ever since the night of the festival when I puked all over the living room floor. He hadn't asked me if I was feeling okay, or even acknowledged me when I walked in the room or came home. He *did* give me dirty looks from time to time, however. He was pretty much treating me like a leper, an obstacle standing between him and his ideal new life. I would be out of his hair very soon, so I hoped he could be patient just a little bit longer.

"…All right."

With the letter finished, I went over the things I planned to bring with me into the Urashima Tunnel one last time. I had everything laid out on the

floor: my flashlight, my wristwatch, my wallet, four packages of Calorie Mate, and a two-and-a-half-liter thermos for drinking water. I shoved them all inside my big hiking backpack and put it on to test the weight. Surprisingly, it was only about half as heavy as my normal school book bag when filled with textbooks. Even after filling up the thermos with water, it'd still be pretty damn light. The plan was to power walk—not run—the whole way once we made it past the torii, so we needed to keep our load as light as possible. This was another one of Anzu's ideas. I felt like I wasn't really pulling my weight as her partner, what with her being the one always coming up with the good ideas, but that just went to show her intelligence. If her wisdom made it more likely for the expedition to be a success, then I'd have been a fool not to take advantage.

The time was finally drawing near. Soon, Karen and I would be reunited. The plan was to take the whole day off and rest up for the big day. Yet I'd barely curled up in bed with a nice volume of manga when I heard my phone ring. It wasn't just a text either, it was an actual phone call—and from Anzu, no less.

"Yes, hello?" I answered.

"Hey, Tono-kun? Sorry for calling you out of the blue like this."

"Nah, don't worry about it. What's up?"

"Are you busy right now? Could we meet up and talk for a bit?"

"Sure, no problem. Where at? The tunnel?"

"Preferably not… I'd like to sit somewhere indoors, if possible."

I glanced at the clock. "Then how 'bout the café? If we wait a bit, we could grab lunch while we're at it."

"Okay. Which café?"

"The one right by the school. Why don't you meet me in front of the main gate at around noon or so?"

"Got it. I'll see you at noon, then."

"Sounds good. Bye."

End call.

I wondered what she wanted to talk about. Maybe she wanted to have a pre-game meeting before the big expedition. One last chance to go over things face-to-face, since we'd only talked via text for the past week. Either way, I'd find out soon enough.

The hot sun radiated mercilessly off the asphalt, baking the bottoms of my feet through my rubber soles. A sudden gust of ocean wind blew past, caressing my cheeks with even more sweltering humidity. As I stood waiting for Anzu in front of the school, a whole half hour before we'd agreed to meet, it felt like I was sitting in a sauna. Unfortunately, I had no other option; if I'd taken the next train, I would've arrived well past noon. One of the many things I hated about living out in the sticks. About ten minutes later, the local bus rolled up to the stop in front of campus and let Anzu out onto the sidewalk. I waved at her, and she jogged to where I stood.

"You're here pretty early. Hope I didn't make you wait too long," she said, slightly apologetic.

"Nah, just got here myself."

"Oh, good. Well then, shall we?"

I nodded, and we headed down the main drag, walking shoulder to shoulder along the sidewalk in the direction of the café. From a bird's-eye view, the area would have looked like a ghost town or an abandoned movie set, with stray cats and crows far outnumbering the number of people on the streets. Occasionally, a small pickup truck went puttering by, but other than that, the only sound was the distinctive cry of the min-min cicada.

"No offense, but this really is a Podunk little country bumpkin town."

"Ha ha… Sorry if it's not up to snuff for you. What was your old neighborhood like?"

"Not nearly as metropolitan as you're imagining. Pretty basic residential area, actually."

"Wow, really? You mean you didn't waltz on over to Harajuku and eat fancy crêpes after school on a daily basis?"

Anzu snickered. “You’ve got an awfully specific mental image of Tokyo life. I mean, sure, there are kids who do stuff like that, but I only knew two or three at most. Downtown is *far*.”

“Huh. That’s wild to me.”

“Just the way it is.” Anzu shrugged before pivoting the conversation back to me. “So, what do you usually do after school?”

“Oh, just whatever. Read manga, cook dinner, chill. Basic stuff.”

“Wow, you know how to cook?”

“I dabble.”

“Maybe one of these days you’ll have to invite me over for dinner.”

As we carried on making small talk, I quietly realized that something felt off about Anzu. She seemed awfully chipper and was being far more talkative than usual. I would normally have considered this a positive development, yet something about her demeanor suggested she was desperate to keep the conversation from dying and was filling the void with whatever words she could find. Almost like she was trying to butter me up before telling me something she knew I wouldn’t want to hear… Then again, it was a very minor behavior shift, all things considered, so maybe I was imagining it.

We walked down the covered sidewalk of the depressed shopping district beneath a canopy of exposed steel beams. It had certainly seen better days; the number of shuttered storefronts far outweighed the number of shops still in business. A stray cat lazily walked in front of us from behind a hat shop that I had never once seen a single customer enter.

“Is there really a café around here?” Anzu asked, growing visibly concerned.

“Yeah, it’s a little hole-in-the-wall right up… Aha. There it is.” I pointed to a signboard they had posted out at the roadside. *We proudly serve KEY COFFEE,* said the manufacturer-provided advertisement. Next to the entrance was a glass display case featuring fake versions of some of the food offerings: a rice omelet, Napolitan spaghetti, et cetera. A bell jingled

as we opened the door and were greeted by the old woman that ran the joint, who was resting her head in her hands on the countertop.

“Hey, kids. Place is empty, so go ahead and sit wherever,” she said, before getting up and heading back into the kitchen. She was obviously annoyed to have her downtime interrupted. We navigated the narrow, dimly lit interior, took a seat at a table for two, and proceeded to peruse the menu. I quickly settled on the rice omelet, while Anzu ordered the deli sandwich. We also requested a pot of coffee for after our meal. The woman scribbled our orders down, then brought two glasses of ice water. I downed mine in a single gulp and plunked the empty cup on the tabletop.

“So what did you—”

“So listen, um—”

Whoops. We’d both started talking at the exact same time. I scratched my head sheepishly and urged Anzu to go first.

“Oh, no, I just, uh… I was wondering if you come to this place very often,” she said.

“Mmm, every now and then. Maybe once a month or so?”

“Just by yourself?”

“Yeah, since junior high, at least. Before that, Karen and I used to come together.” Usually also with my mother and father, mind you, but I felt no need to mention them specifically.

“Interesting… What kind of kid *was* Karen, anyway? I don’t think I’ve ever asked.”

“Aw, man. She was great… Super cute, and a pretty smart cookie to boot. Just insanely good at reading the room and picking up on social cues. If she’d lived to junior high, I guarantee she would’ve been the most popular girl in school.”

“Wow. I’d really love to hear more about her. Got any fun stories you can share?”

“Oh, do I ever! I still remember this one time, back when she was only three years old, when we were—”

I started rattling off a number of hilarious childhood anecdotes, but all the while, I was thinking to myself that something didn't feel right. Obviously I was glad for the opportunity to talk about my little sister, but why did Anzu suddenly seem so interested in knowing more about her? Surely this couldn't be the reason she'd called me to meet. After finally reaching a stopping point in my recounting of classic Karen moments, I decided to ask.

"So hey, what did you want to talk abou—"

"All righty, kids. One rice omelet and one deli sandwich."

Unfortunately, our food showed up before I could finish.

"Let's eat first," Anzu suggested.

"Y-yeah, okay."

It looked like I'd have to wait until after lunch. Oh well. Using the bottom of my spoon, I spread the ketchup out over the top of the omelet. It was your average, simple rice omelet, a thin layer of egg wrapped around chicken fried rice, but it was the most cost-effective item on the menu from a price-per-calorie standpoint, so I made a habit of ordering it every time.

I glanced up at Anzu as I cut my omelet with the side of my fork. Her deli sandwich was pretty hefty, layers upon layers of ham, lettuce, tomatoes, and cheese on French bread. She clutched it with both hands like a hamburger, letting her teeth sink in deep. I had to admit, it looked pretty good. I made a mental note to order that the next time I came—then remembered that this place would very likely be gone by the time we returned from the Urashima Tunnel. As I stared with melancholy at the sandwich I'd likely never have a chance to try, I noticed something: Anzu's hands were trembling.

"Hey, Hanashiro?"

"Mmf…? Whash up?"

"Is the AC bothering you?"

She swallowed her bite. "No, it's fine."

“Well, all right… You’ve got some mustard on you, by the way.” I rubbed my thumb against the corner of my own mouth to indicate where it was.

Anzu went pink and quickly wiped it off with a napkin. It seemed she was totally oblivious to the fact that her hands were shaking. I thought it strange but finished my meal nonetheless. After taking our dishes away, the woman brought out our after-lunch coffee.

“So you mentioned over the phone you wanted to talk about something?” I said.

“I wanted to ask you about your little sister.” Anzu poured milk and sugar into her coffee and stirred it around. “I figured I should know a bit more about her, or else how am I supposed to find her in the tunnel?” Her spoon clinked rhythmically against the sides of the ceramic coffee cup.

“Oh, is that right? You’d think you would’ve asked more about what she looked like than her personality, in that case.”

“I guess I got a little sidetracked by all the great stories you were telling. Rest assured, I was planning to ask about her appearance as well.”

“C’mon, there’s gotta be something more to it than that, right? I mean, these are all things you could have asked over the phone.”

“I disagree. I always prefer to have more involved discussions in person—it’s more efficient.”

“…You’re spilling your coffee.” Anzu froze and abruptly stopped stirring. Then, biting her lip anxiously, she lifted the spoon out of the cup and set it gently on the saucer.

“Look, Hanashiro. I’m not trying to grill you here…but are you sure there isn’t something you’re not telling me? Some other reason you called me here today?”

She didn’t respond.

“Listen. I don’t want either of us to walk into that tunnel tomorrow with any lingering regrets or uncertainties. So why don’t you come right out and say it? Whatever it is, I promise I won’t think any less of you.”

Anzu looked at me, eyes wavering nervously. It was clearly something she was very reluctant to discuss. I sat straight and braced myself for whatever it might be, resolved to keep calm and listen even if it was something I didn't want to hear.

Anzu took a long, long sip of her coffee, then opened her mouth. "… Have you ever heard of *Giorno Monthly*?"

"Huh?"

Of all the things I might have guessed she was about to say, that certainly wouldn't have been among them. *Giorno Monthly* was a manga periodical aimed largely at an older audience. I'd leafed through it a few times at my usual barber shop; it featured a wide variety of more mature genres, from dark fantasy to adult contemporary slice-of-life. In general, you could always tell that the authors had a really unique creative vision with every story they published.

"Yeah, I'm familiar. What about it?"

"…Four times a year, they do this thing called the Rising Star Competition, where they take original manga submissions from aspiring artists and select one winner for actual publication."

"Uh-huh."

"And, well…I actually entered my own story in this spring's competition a few months back. They finally published the results in this month's issue, which went on sale today."

Aha. That explained why Anzu had made us wait until August 2nd to do our expedition into the Urashima Tunnel. I'd found it highly odd that she picked the 2nd over the 1st, but now I understood; Anzu had wanted to see the results before we left. That made sense, of course. Obviously, if she *did* win, it would be pretty unfortunate for her to vanish for several years without ever knowing.

Wait… Hang on a minute.

"You're not about to tell me you *won*, are you?"

"No, no. I definitely lost."

“Oh… G-gotcha.”

“But,” Anzu continued before I could offer my condolences, “as it turns out, there was an editor on the publishing team who really took a liking to my submission, even though it didn’t win… And they got in touch with me to ask if I’d be interested in working on a manga together.”

“…Wait. S-seriously? So your story’s gonna get published after all?!”

“No, not exactly. It just means that I’ll have my own editor now, who I can work with on any hypothetical future projects. However, I haven’t heard anything more than that…”

“Wow. Your own editor, huh…”

The idea was so foreign to me that it was starting to feel like I wasn’t worthy of existing in Anzu’s orbit anymore. When I made eye contact with her, it looked almost as if she was being rapidly pulled away from me, like one of those stretching corridor scenes in horror movies. Vertigo effect.

“So, uh… What does this mean, exactly? Now that you’ve got an editor, where do you go from here? Y’know, it’s funny, I read a lot of manga, but it feels like I know shockingly little about how it’s actually made.”

“Well, the vast majority of people keep entering competitions until they win one. In theory, I’d keep writing manuscripts, send them to my editor for review, make adjustments based on their feedback, and hopefully improve the end product as a result… At least, that’s how I assume it goes. I’m not much of an expert myself.”

“So is that what you’ve decided you wanna do now?” I asked. Maybe I was pushing too hard, because her brow furrowed slightly.

“This isn’t about what I ‘want.’ All it means is that there’s an editor out there who likes my work, which is kinda cool. That’s it. End of story. Doesn’t change my plans in the slightest.”

“Well, the ‘plan’ was to head into the Urashima Tunnel tomorrow… Are you sure you’re still cool with that?”

It was entirely possible that we’d be leaving the world we knew behind for months, even years. Something told me Anzu’s new editor

wasn’t going to sit around waiting for her next manga for *that* long, and I didn’t know the first thing about the manga business.

“…That’s a ridiculous question,” said Anzu. “Do you seriously think I’d bow out at the last minute just because they randomly decided to assign me an editor? Sure, it’ll be a shame to pass up that opportunity, but who cares? The tunnel’s going to grant me something much more valuable than one measly editor. It’s not like this means I’ll have to give up writing manga for the rest of my life or anything either. Now that I know my work is worth something, I can double down on it as soon as we make it back out. So please—just let the editor thing go already, okay?”

If that’s really how you feel, then why do you look so distressed? I thought being a manga artist was the only thing you ever wanted. Aren’t you ecstatic to finally get some recognition from the pros? Are you really gonna throw away this once in a lifetime opportunity to make it big, just like that? Like hell you are.

“I think you should really give this more thought, Hanashiro. Let’s at least postpone the expedition for now.”

Anzu shook her head vehemently as though I’d asked her to break her moral code. “Absolutely not. It’ll only make it harder to let go in the long run.”

“Harder to let go of what?”

“Of everything. My manga career, my friendship with Koharu—all the dead weight tying me down that might make me reconsider going into the tunnel. The longer we put this off, the harder it’s going to be to cut those ties and leave everything behind. If we don’t kiss the world goodbye and launch the expedition right now, I’m afraid we never will.”

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t call your friend dead weight. And don’t talk about your manga that way. I know how important to you it is.”

“I mean, it’s just a stupid hobby…”

“Listen to me. I can tell you’re getting cold feet. You wouldn’t have called me here to talk if you weren’t. If you’re having second thoughts, then we’ve gotta seriously pump the breaks and reconsider our game plan.”

“Argh…” Anzu groaned, placing her elbows on the table and holding her head in her hands. Her bangs hung like drapes over the table as she let out a whine of distress. “I don’t know what’s best for me in the long run… What should I…?”

I gazed at the ceiling fan overhead, its motor whirring softly as it spun in circles around a single fixed point, around and around and around again. I made my decision.

“We’ll postpone it for now. It’ll give us both time to think harder about what we really want.”

“…Yeah, okay.”

Paying no mind to how utterly heartbroken this seemed to leave Anzu, I lifted my coffee cup and poured its lukewarm contents down my throat.

Even after we’d settled up with the owner and stepped out of the café, Anzu looked pretty despondent: her shoulders sagged, and her eyes were fixed diagonally on the ground. The whole way home, neither of us really said a word, and the few times I did try to strike up a conversation, she only gave one- or two-word answers. Eventually, I gave up entirely, figuring it would do more harm than good to attempt to forcibly cheer her up. So we walked in silence the rest of the way to the bus stop in front of the school. Originally, I planned to say goodbye to Anzu and head to the train station right away, but I didn’t feel right leaving her in this emotionally disheveled state, so I decided to hang back and wait with her until her bus arrived.

“…I’m really sorry,” she said abruptly, breaking the silence.

“Nah, it’s cool. Not like either of us did anything wrong here.”

“But…you’ve been waiting so long to see your sister again, and now because of me…”

Anzu sniffled. She seemed to feel much worse about this than I’d realized. Scratching my head restlessly, I tried to summon the most reassuring voice I could muster.

“Aw, c’mon. Cheer up, buttercup. I hate to see a pretty girl cry.”

“Stop, I’m being serious here…”

“So was I.”

I placed my hands on Anzu’s shoulders, and she jerked back a bit. She had such a delicate frame; I could feel the exact shape of her clavicles through her skin. I squeezed her shoulders gently, and a tremor ran through her. I didn’t let go and instead brought my face closer—close enough to see myself reflected in her teary eyes, between each beat of her long lashes.

“Wh-what?” she asked.

“…You really are pretty, though. You know that?”

“Huh…?”

“I mean, you’ve got big, beautiful eyes, perfect skin, a cute little nose… That’s about as perfect as a face can get. You could be a model if you really wanted to. Hell, you’re prettier than half those magazine girls already.”

Anzu’s face went crimson, to the point that I almost expected steam to pour out of her ears. Standing this close to her, I could see each and every little shift in her expression oh-so-perfectly.

“C-cut it out, Tono-kun… What’s gotten into you all of a sudden…?”

Anzu tried to cover her face, but I took her wrists and pulled them away, holding them high over her head in a forced “I surrender” pose. Then I went on, in a voice loud enough for every teacher and student on campus to hear:

“Face it, Hanashiro! You’re a total babe! You’re both drop-dead gorgeous *and* irresistibly adorable! You’ve gotta be the cutest girl in the whole wide world!”

This time, I thought I really did see steam coming out her ears.

“W-would you *knock it off?!*” Anzu hissed, wresting her hands free so that she could use them to cover my mouth. “Wh-what the hell is wrong with you?! Have you gone *completely* insane?!”

“Ha ha ha… Sorry, sorry. Just thought it might be a quick and easy way to cheer you up.”

“You are literally unbelievable…” Anzu left out a sharp, huffing sigh of disdain. A moment later, just as I’d hoped, I heard a little “pfft”—and then the levee broke, and she burst out laughing. “Pfft ha ha! Ah ha ha ha! Oh God, my sides! How can you be *so dumb*?! I’m dying! Aha ha ha ha ha!”

Seeing her cackle uncontrollably made me start to feel pretty silly too, and before long, I busted up laughing right along with her, impervious to the judgmental glances we received from the occasional passersby. The laughter came like a raging fire from deep within; each time I thought we were finished, the coals reignited and flared all over again. Before long, it felt like we’d forgotten what the joke was in the first place and were laughing at the fact we’d been laughing for so long. Finally, when my cheeks were soft and sore, the giddiness mercifully abated. We were both drenched in sweat and wholly out of breath.

“Holy crap, I’m exhausted,” I said, still panting. “Sheesh, Hanashiro. Why’d you have to go and make me laugh for so long?”

“Me? *You’re* the one who started it… God, my abs hurt after that.” Anzu still snickered a little as she wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. It was only a simple gesture, yet on her, for reasons beyond me, I found it oddly alluring, even seductive.

“Man, you’ve got a really attractive laugh, though,” I said. “Anyone ever told you that?”

“Oh, no you don’t! I’m not letting you get me riled up again… Get outta here, you!” Anzu turned away in a cutesy huff. I found myself thinking that it was like a scene straight out of a teen romance manga, and I savored the unique thrill of awkward, adolescent flirtation.

Then, as if right on cue, Anzu’s ride rolled up to the bus stop, and the automatic doors opened. She shot me a playful smirk and hopped aboard.

“All right. I guess we’ll be in touch.”

“Yep. See ya later.”

With a loud whoosh of compressed air, the automatic doors closed, and the bus pulled away from the sidewalk. I stood there and watched it go

until it was completely out of sight. Behind the obnoxious cacophony of cicadas, I heard muffled wind instruments begin to play out of tune. It seemed that wind ensemble practice had begun. If I listened closer, I detected the sound of one of the sports teams shouting the names of different stretches as they wound down for the day. To be sure, it was about the time when club activities normally wrapped up. If I stayed much longer, I'd see a fair number of students walking out the main gate.

"…Guess I'd better get going."

I set off down the sidewalk toward the train station. When I looked above me, the sky overhead was so unbelievably blue, it almost didn't look real.

I felt so alive.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE
Run

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 5:
Run

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS since Kaoru and I met for lunch at the café. I was sitting on my bed, hugging my knees to my chest and fiddling with my cell phone. My palms were sweating a bit despite the AC, perhaps a sign that I was more nervous than I realized. I opened my address book and scrolled down to Kaoru's name, then took a deep breath.

"…Come on. You can do this."

I pressed the call button. Then I waited.

Three days prior, I'd purchased the latest issue of *Giorno Monthly* from the local bookstore first thing in the morning and learned that I'd lost the spring competition. Though in all honesty, I had no delusions about my work being award-worthy to begin with, so it wasn't a huge letdown. In a way, it came as a small relief, allowing me to shift my focus and devote myself fully to the Urashima Tunnel expedition with no lingering doubts.

Shortly thereafter, I received a phone call from someone who introduced themselves as an editor for the magazine. After briefly verifying my credentials, he offered his condolences to me for not winning the contest but said that he had felt "a spark of something" in my work. It wasn't the most specific appraisal, to be sure, yet it made me do a stupid little happy dance. That emotional high didn't last long, as he proceeded to rattle off a laundry list of ways in which my submission was sorely lacking. You can't do X, you should've done Y for this part, why in the world didn't you do Z, et cetera. I tried my best to answer his questions, discombobulated though I was, and in the end he suggested we meet up in person sometime to discuss specifics, then hung up. The phone call lasted more than thirty minutes, yet for me, it felt like the blink of an eye.

Then it hit me: I had a choice to make. Would I pursue this new opportunity and work toward creating manga professionally, or would I go into the Urashima Tunnel to seek a greater purpose in life regardless? It was

a difficult conundrum, to be sure. After going back and forth in my head over and over to no avail, I decided to look to Kaoru for guidance. That didn't help either, unfortunately. All it did was postpone the expedition, and now I was *extra* determined to come to a final decision before I delayed him any further. I spent every waking hour deliberating with myself. Three days later, on the morning of August 4th, I finally made up my mind.

I would venture into the Urashima Tunnel after all. I couldn't leave Kaoru in the lurch. I jumped into action. First, I called the editor and let him know I really appreciated the offer but that I had to respectfully decline due to personal reasons. I was prepared to have to explain myself a fair bit, but he just said "okay" without asking why. I was grateful that the call went smoothly, though it made me wonder if he'd been feeding me a line with all that talk about my "potential," which was a pretty crappy feeling, to be honest. At least now I had nothing left to have misgivings about. I wanted to share this news with Kaoru as soon as possible, so I took a deep breath and dialed him up. But then…

"We're sorry, but the number you have dialed is currently unavailable. Either it has been disconnected or it is somewhere beyond the reach of its local service provider."

So either his cell phone was dead or he was out of range. Given how terrible cell service generally was in Kozaki, I tended to assume it was the latter. My phone had lost signal while I was riding the bus down the main drag, so it wasn't all that uncommon. Yet for whatever reason, I felt unusually apprehensive. I waited three minutes, then dialed again.

"We're sorry, but the number you have dialed is currently unavailable. Either it has been disconnected—"

I waited another three minutes.

"We're sorry, but the number you have dialed is currently unavailable. Either—"

I waited thirty.

"We're sorry, but the number you have dialed—"

I stood from my bed. *No way. He wouldn't.* Worst-case scenarios oozed one by one from my brain, slowly filling my head with a flood of doubts. The pit of my stomach tightened as each breath grew shallower than the last. I called Koharu as fast as I could.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Kawasaki? Do you know where Tono-kun's house is? If so, could you tell me?"

"Huh? Yeah, I know where he lives. Why do you ask?"

"Sorry, can't explain right now. Could you just tell me? It's extremely time sensitive."

"S-sure, no problem. Uhhh, I guess I'll text you his address, and you can go from there?"

"Cool, thanks."

I hung up, and the follow-up text from Koharu came pretty quickly. It had Kaoru's address, as well as a line underneath saying she was worried about me and that we should talk soon. I hated not offering her more of an explanation, but I really didn't have time. I grabbed my wallet, slipped on my sandals in the entryway, and dashed out the front door. As I ran down the hallway of the condominium, I checked my phone to see when the next train to the station by Kaoru's house would run. Looked like at least an hour. *God, I hate living in the sticks.*

I grabbed my bike from the bike lot and straddled one leg over it, then sped off in the direction of Kaoru's neighborhood. It was a straight shot for a while, followed by a steep uphill climb. While I was generally quite confident in my athletic abilities, these hilly country roads could be pretty grueling at times. The uneven pavement slowly wore away my stamina, and sweat poured down my entire body. My hair refused to stay out of my eyes as I pedaled up the steep incline. When I finally reached the top, I could see all the way across the open ocean. It was a gorgeous view, but I had no time to enjoy it, so I bombed down the opposite side of the hill. After passing an old fire station with a worn, red emergency light over the garage, I spotted a big old-fashioned house. That was the place.

I parked my bike at the edge of the property and put down the kickstand, then ran to ring the bell. After about a minute of waiting, an older gentleman answered the door with one hand while scratching his lower back with the other. I assumed this was Kaoru's father, though the two looked absolutely nothing alike.

"Hi there… Can I help you?" he asked.

"Hello, sir. I'm Ton… I'm one of your son's classmates. Is he around?"

The man ceased his back-scratching and gave me a suspicious look.

"No… I'm afraid he's out of the house at the moment."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Uhhh… Since day before yesterday, I think?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. In its place came another wave of anxiety and urgency. "Where did he go?! Please, you have to tell me!"

"Hell if I know. Figured he's staying the night at a friend's house. He's been doing that an awful lot lately."

"…All right. Thank you for your help, sir." I bowed quickly before dashing back to hop on my bike once more. *If he's been gone for two days, that can only mean one thing.…* I tried my best to shake that harrowing thought from my mind. There was no point in stressing myself out even more. I just had to hurry. And pray.

As I pedaled as fast as I could down the winding roads toward the Urashima Tunnel, I felt a dampness on my cheek. Thinking it was a stray bead of sweat, I wiped it away, only for it to quickly be replaced by a dozen more rapid-fire droplets. *Oh God.* It was raining; and here it had been so pleasant out only a minute ago. The light sprinkle quickly turned to a full-on shower, and I was soaked from head to toe. With each rotation of the wheels, I felt the extremely unpleasant sensation of my wet clothes adhering to and then peeling away from my skin over and over again. Then, before I knew it, I was crying—though I wasn't entirely sure why. Just couldn't hold it all in any longer, I guess. Yet still, I pedaled onward, as fast as my legs would take me, even though they were on fire. Even after it

started to hurt so bad that I thought I'd sprained both ankles. I just kept pedaling.

"Come on, Tono-kun… Please…!"

After what felt like ages, I finally stood at the entrance to the Urashima Tunnel. I'd thrown my bike to the ground farther back down the road and run the rest of the way barefoot, my sandals having fallen off somewhere along the way. The bottoms of my feet throbbed in pain from being stabbed by hundreds of tiny pebbles. I had to reach Kaoru as soon as possible, so I swallowed the pain and ran into the tunnel regardless.

A little ways in, I noticed a glass bottle lying on the ground. Upon further inspection, I saw a little paper note inside. *A message in a bottle?* I could only assume Kaoru had left it for me, so I picked it up and extracted the cork. Sure enough, it was a few sheets of folded notebook paper, all filled in with pencil. I wiped the rain and sweat from my hands on my clothes so as not to ruin the paper, then started reading the letter from the top, slowly and carefully.

To Anzu Hanashiro.

If you're reading this letter and your name is not *Anzu Hanashiro, please put it back in the bottle and return it to where you found it. Though that being said, I can't imagine anyone but her would wander in here and stumble upon it, so I'll continue under the assumption that the person reading this is, in fact, Anzu Hanashiro.*

First things first: I owe you an apology. I'm really sorry for heading into the tunnel without you. You probably feel pretty betrayed right now. Hell, I wouldn't blame you if you never forgave me. But if you could at least read this letter all the way through to the end before you write me off forever, I'd really appreciate it.

Now then. I'm sure you're wondering why I decided to leave you behind and enter the tunnel all by myself. So I'll tell you right now. The short answer is: I think you really need to pursue this manga opportunity right away. Whatever it is you think you might find in here, you don't really need it. What you really need is to make a name for yourself as a manga artist ASAP. That story you wrote was riveting, and it deserves to be read by a much wider audience than just me. I'll admit, I was a little surprised at first to hear that they were ready to assign you your own editor, but honestly? With how good you are, they'd be downright stupid not to. You deserve every bit of this. I really mean that.

But you know better than I do that manga trends change rapidly with the times, right? Pretty much anything that's popular today will feel dated in four or five years, and it's hard to tell whether something that'd resonate with people today would still be popular much further down the line. I feel like the average reader's tastes and sensibilities fluctuate and mature along with the industry as a whole. Not that I'm an expert or anything, mind you. My point is, I really think you need to hit the ground running and make your big debut as soon as you possibly can. On that, I'm all but certain. If you really feel that manga is your true calling in life, then you shouldn't waste any more time chasing fantasies like me. You've got the talent—your dream's right there for the taking.

On that note, there's one other thing I'd like to say. You told me a while back that your whole motivation for exploring the Urashima Tunnel was because you "wanted to be someone extraordinary," remember? And, well…if that's really your dream, then I'm not gonna stand here and spit all over it. To be honest, though, I'm not so sure you really need to be out here chasing the extraordinary for the sake of it. Because you strike me as the type of girl who's totally capable of enjoying life and finding fulfillment in all the normal ways too. Granted, I get that we've only known each other for a single month, but I still feel like I got to know you pretty damn well in that short period of time.

When you clung to my shirt for dear life that first time we explored the tunnel at night, I got to see how scared and vulnerable you can be.

When you showed me your manga and I gushed to you about how incredible it was, I got to see how ecstatic you can be when you realize you've created something with genuine artistic worth. When the three of us went to the festival together, I got to see how much fun you can be when you let your hair down and enjoy yourself. And when I told you how pretty I think you are (which I meant, by the way), I got to see how adorable and red in the face you get when you're embarrassed.

Do you want to know the first thought that popped into my mind, each and every one of these times? "Wow, she really is just an ordinary girl deep down." Yes, I realize that to you, that's probably the single greatest insult imaginable. God forbid someone feel content with being normal, right? But like I said above, I'm really not trying to spit all over your dreams here. I want you to think long and hard about this stuff, is all. About what you really want out of life, I mean.

If you do take my advice and decide not to come in here, I want you to know that I don't expect you to wait for me. I want you to make a ton of new friends, live your life to the fullest, and laugh so hard, you get ab cramps every single day. I want you to write the manga of your dreams and let the whole world see what an incredible storyteller you are. And when I finally make it out of here, I hope to see your name listed right up there alongside the all-time greats. Trust me when I say I genuinely, wholeheartedly cannot wait to see what wondrous worlds you'll come up with.

Finally, I'd like to say one last thing, in case you're still on the fence.

You're already the most extraordinary person I've ever met, Hanashiro. And yeah, I realize that's not really the same thing as having your name go down in history. But maybe the name Anzu Hanashiro doesn't have to mean something to each and every person who ever lives.

Maybe it could be enough for it to mean the world to just one.

***

I checked my wristwatch as I ran down the corridor. Eighteen minutes past midnight. I'd made a point of stepping through the first torii at exactly midnight, which meant I'd been in tunnel time for just under twenty minutes—nearly a month in real-world time. Out there, my summer vacation was over. I assumed Anzu had probably read my letter by now too. Given that she was a much faster runner than I was, the fact that I hadn't heard her chasing me was pretty much proof positive that she'd taken my advice and decided not to come inside the tunnel, which was a relief. A *huge* relief.

I'm sorry, Hanashiro. Sorry for forcing you to make such a painful decision. I don't know how I'll ever make it up to you. I know you have feelings for me. I can tell. I can also tell that I'm falling for you too. But your feelings for me are different—they're a product of a misguided desire to play the role of tragic heroine by proxy. You crave the drama and emotional intensity you feel is lacking in your life, and you think I can provide fulfillment or growth for you in that regard, as someone who's experienced a lot of loss of his own. But I can't give you that. I literally do not have it.

If you really want to be someone extraordinary, don't waste your time getting involved with a hopeless wreck like me. Just focus on being the best version of you that you can be. Don't go out hunting for supernatural shortcuts or a tragic backstory that'll earn you fast notoriety or cheap sympathy. You've gotta buckle down and put in the work to climb that ladder like everyone else. I know you hate doing things the normal way, but I can promise the view from the top will be that much sweeter when you feel like you've truly earned it.

And you will *reach the top. I know you will.*

I mean, look at how long you've been creating your own manga, and without ever sharing any of it with anybody before you met me. I'm sure there had to have been times when you felt discouraged because a story wasn't coming together and thought about putting down that pencil for

good. Or maybe you really do love drawing with all your heart, and you never once considered giving up on it, no matter what the rest of the world might say. Either way, you didn't give up on that dream. And here you are today, having your work officially recognized by industry professionals. That, to me, seems pretty goddamn extraordinary. Far more so than stumbling on a magic tunnel could ever be, and way more meaningful to boot. So please, Hanashiro, don't let this opportunity go to waste. Live your life while you can, because tomorrow's never a given. Especially when you have a chance to be someone right here, today.

Go out there and live like you mean it.

And no matter what you do, don't ever end up like me.

TOTAL TIME ELAPSED: 1 HR 25 MINS (OUTSIDE: 141 DAYS)

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Whoa, what the…"

Just a little farther ahead, I saw the tunnel curve upward at a steep incline. It was still a straight shot, so there was no real cause for hesitation, but it was certainly going to take a huge toll on my stamina, and my calves were already wobbling beneath me like rickety stilts. I couldn't afford to pull a ligament or something at this stage in the game, so I decided to take a five-minute breather, to be safe. I hunkered down on the ground and pulled my thermos from my backpack to take a good, long swig of water.

I had to have run at least ten klicks, so realistically, I should have come out the other side of the tunnel. The fact that I still couldn't see the exit seemed to suggest that there were some space-time shenanigans afoot. I felt like I was making a ton of forward progress, but in all honesty, there was no telling if I was even a tenth of the way through the tunnel yet. Interestingly, this time around, I had yet to encounter any strange things from my past that shouldn't have existed within this space. Not that I wasn't

glad for that, mind you, but it was starting to make me anxious. Things were going *too* smoothly.

Feeling restless, I checked my wristwatch. Only two minutes had passed since I sat down for a quick rest, and already I was antsy to get up and go again. It was impossible to truly get any rest with the thought of how much real-world time I was wasting with every minute constantly weighing on my mind. Every second spent sitting still did far more to mentally wear me down than the exhaustion of running ever could. I stood, took a huge deep breath, and then started booking it up the steep incline.

TOTAL TIME ELAPSED: 5 HRS 20 MINS (OUTSIDE: 1 YEAR, 168 DAYS)

"Huff…huff…"

My light jog had officially slowed to a trudging walk. With each plodding step, the soles of my shoes scraped loudly against the rocky tunnel floor. I had no idea how far I'd come anymore. All I knew was that every joint and muscle in my legs hurt like hell. For the first three hours or so that I was in the tunnel, I cried out Karen's name every couple of minutes, but now I couldn't muster the energy. It was hard enough trying to propel myself forward. By now, an entire year and a half had passed in the outside world, yet I hadn't seen hide nor hair of my little sister. All I'd seen were an infinite number of the same exact torches and the same exact torii—though there had been *some* changes, like the sudden steep inclines or curves in the tunnel's course. For a while there, I was worried that the first uphill climb might go on forever, but it soon reversed into an easy downhill jaunt, and there was also a time when I hit several sharp ninety-degree turns in quick succession. My sense of direction was entirely out of whack at this point, and I had no idea if I was supposed to be farther underground or aboveground, or if I was even going in the same direction horizontally. Thankfully, there hadn't yet been any forks or intersections, so I at least knew I was still making *some* forward progress.

"Hrgh… Goddammit…"

My throat was parched, and I'd already gone through nearly half my water supply. Considering that I still had to make my way back the entire distance I'd come, I really didn't want to drink any more than that. Why in the world had I decided to pick CalorieMate, perhaps the single biggest thirst-inducer, as my only source of nutrition on this journey? *Man, I'd kill for an ice-cold Lifeguard right about now,* I thought. Nevertheless, I pressed on, trying my best to suppress my unquenched thirst, when all of a sudden, I heard a loud *thunk* from ahead, like the sound of a large boulder being flipped on its side. A vague sense of déjà vu made me stop right where I was. I knew it had to be some sort of omen. One of the tunnel's strange manifestations was about to appear right before my eyes. A chill ran through my entire body, and a low pitch rang in my ears.

…No. It wasn't just in my head. It was an actual sound. The sound of thousands of footsteps and human voices, each one so chipper and full of life. Yet no matter how hard I tried, they were too numerous and muddled for me to make out a single word. Even so, there were people there. People other than me, just ahead. A lot of them. I wet my throat with a fresh coat of saliva and called out into the darkness.

"Karen…? You there…?"

I took another step forward—but then something reached out and grabbed my right arm, and my heart nearly burst out of my chest. Terrified, I turned to look over my shoulder, and my jaw dropped. It was my father.

"There you are, Kaoru," he said. "I've been looking all over for you."

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. I'm really in for it now. How the hell did he find me here? My head was a jumbled mess of panic and fear. It was such a shock to my system that my brain was still trying to catch up.

"What's the matter? You look like you've just seen a ghost. Not feeling well?"

This made me finally snap back to my senses. There was no tension in my father's voice whatsoever. On further inspection, I saw he was wearing a summery yukata, and his face looked a fair bit younger as well. Something wasn't right here. No, *nothing* was right. Just how the hell had he gotten here? If he'd followed me all the way, then surely I would have

heard his footsteps or his voice calling out to me. As I pondered this little conundrum, I noticed the gaping hole behind my father, through which a bustling crowd of people could be seen. Apparently this was the source of the voices I'd been hearing.

I tried my best to collect my thoughts and analyze the situation rationally. On either side of the crowd, I could also make out dozens of red paper lanterns and food stands. It was like an entire festival was happening through a little portal in the side of the Urashima Tunnel, and a younger version of my father had just so happened to wander in from the other side.

No, that's impossible. The far more likely explanation was that this was an illusion conjured by the tunnel itself. That was still an "impossible" phenomenon, in a sense, but one that I at least had reason to believe was plausible due to prior experience.

"Is the crowd getting to be too much for you, son? If you want, we can head home."

The realization that this was not the same father I'd left behind came as a huge relief. That relief was quickly followed by a wave of anger. Why had the tunnel given me *him* and not Karen? Even if it was his younger, kinder self, I didn't want anything to do with this guy anymore. Didn't even want to see his ugly mug ever again. Yet…for some inexplicable reason, I felt a strange sense of ease and belonging. It pissed me off beyond belief, but somewhere deep down, a part of me yearned desperately to cling to this man who was supposed to be my father figure, even though he had failed miserably in that respect. It was an emotion I thought I'd discarded years and years ago. I could deal with him ignoring me, or abusing me physically or verbally, but this I couldn't handle. It threw me for an entire loop. I stood frozen in place.

"Kaoru? Are you all right, sweetie?"

Then came another voice I recognized all too well, as my biological mother poked her head out from behind my father. It was the mother I remembered from back when Karen was still alive, when every day was a gift, and we were the picture of a happy family. That version of her stood

right before my eyes, smiling down at me with the welcoming warmth only a mother could provide.

“Yeah, he doesn’t seem quite right,” my father said. “Maybe a soda or something would cheer him up.”

“Good idea. We just walked by a drink stand a minute ago. You like Lifeguard, don’t you, sweetie?”

“I’ll have a beer, while you’re at it.”

“Oh, no you won’t. *You’ve* still gotta drive us home, mister…”

“Well, it was worth a shot! Ha ha ha…”

No… Stop it. I can’t take this crap anymore.

“Ahhhhhh!”

I screamed at the top of my lungs, then tore my arm free while the two of them were too startled to react. Then I took off running as fast as I possibly could. They called after me, but I refused to turn or look back. I just ran and ran, until eventually tears streamed down my cheeks.

“Damn it… Stop trying to screw with my head!”

How could I *not* feel conflicted after being shown such an idyllic vignette from my childhood? It was like the Urashima Tunnel was deliberately trying to pour salt into old wounds. I fought the urge to puke and kept on running, glaring angrily down the tunnel’s throat as I wiped the tears from my eyes.

Besides, as irritating as it was, that vision had only gone to support my hypothesis as to the tunnel’s true nature, the one I’d come up with in Anzu’s bedroom. If my theory was correct, then it would only be a matter of time before I was reunited with Karen again. So I kept running, that thought as my sole motivation. As long as I could see my sister again, it would all be worth it. I’d never ask for anything ever again.

TOTAL TIME ELAPSED: 9 HRS 56 MINS (OUTSIDE: 2 YEARS, 263 DAYS)

Dammit… God damn *it.* Just how far did this goddamn tunnel go? I'd been running for nearly ten hours now, and still all I could see were torches and torii. Where the hell was Karen? How much time had passed in the outside world? Like, going on three years? I'd have graduated high school, if I were living out there at normal speed. Even if I were to give up and turn back this instant, it would still be at least five years spent in the tunnel by the time I made it out. Everyone I knew would either be finishing college or well on their way to building a fruitful career. They'd be studying hard for their senior thesis, or working full-time, finding new hobbies, and getting hitched. And then there was me, running in circles through the dark, going from seventeen to twenty-two without accomplishing a damn thing.

I had virtually no water left at this point, maybe enough for one or two more big sips. My legs were fast approaching their limit as well. Every step forward sent a sharp, searing pain through my knees. If I went much farther, I knew I wouldn't be physically capable of making the return journey. But what was I to do? Just turn back? Or should I keep clinging to that last remaining sliver of hope and press onward?

"…Ha ha."

I couldn't help but laugh. That was a stupid question. If I turned back now, all of this would have been one gigantic waste of time. I would have given away over five years of my life for nothing, when Karen could be just around the next corner. Or even closer. To give up now would be the stupidest choice imaginable. Only a complete moron would do that. I had to press on and have faith that she was waiting for me just ahead.

"Karen!" I cried out for the umpteenth time, my voice raw and hoarse as it squeezed past my dry throat. Yet I would keep calling her name until I found her. No matter what happened, I refused to rest my legs until she and I were reunited.

Was I sure I was doing the right thing?

Wasn't there anything better I could be doing with my life?

Was this all going to end up being an even bigger waste of time when I finally *did* throw in the towel?

I tried my best not to give questions like these much thought. Obviously, I was scared out of my mind by the possibilities, but I refused to think about them. Or when I did, I fought hard not to give in to those fears. Nobody's future was certain, after all. We were all just running, groping through the dark as time and death slowly crept up on us. I wasn't the only one afraid of that uncertainty. The same could be said for Anzu, or Koharu, or anyone. All we could do was keep moving forward, holding fast to the belief that one day, we'd get where we were going—before the world snatched it away from us. So I downed the rest of my water in one gulp and kept walking, dragging my feet along the floor.

TOTAL TIME ELAPSED: 14 HRS 20 MINS (OUTSIDE: 3 YEARS, 338 DAYS)

I made my way up yet another steep incline. I couldn't see in front of me anymore, and I was practically crawling with how sluggishly I was dragging my legs. I'd discarded all the things I'd brought with me—I'd even thrown away my shoes. Turning back now was no longer an option I was willing to consider.

"Grrrgh…"

I couldn't remember how long I'd been climbing this hill, just that it had been going on for what felt like ages. No doubt it was the longest uphill trek I'd ever made in my entire life.

"Argh…"

God, this was excruciating. My entire body ached with exhaustion, and my legs had been reduced to two mushy hunks of tenderized flesh only capable of sending out distress signals to my pain receptors with every step. My eyelids were starting to feel heavy too. I needed sleep. I wanted to stop and take a rest. I was sure that lying down would help me recover a bit and give me a much-needed break from this endless incline.

I couldn't let myself do that. I knew that if I lay down, there was a good chance I'd never get back up. I had to press on and make it to the top

of this damn hill…

…Then again, what if I gave up? I mean, this seemed downright impossible, and I was approaching my limit. No, that was a lie: I'd long since passed it. I was using every trick in the book to keep my mind off the pain, and somehow it had worked thus far. However, even if I were to find Karen now, there wouldn't really be any point to it. I lacked the least sliver of willpower or stamina to make the journey home.

God, I'm so tired.

Maybe I ought to give up.

…But first.

Let's go a little farther.

Just in case.

I'll keep walking just a little longer, and if I don't find anything, I'll give up.

Just a little farther.

Just a little farther.

Just a…little…farther…

I stopped dead in my tracks. Not because my legs had finally gone on strike, but because something stood directly in my way. Lifting my weary head to take a look, I saw an old wooden door. My heart let out an audible *ka-thump*. A surge of renewed hope shot through my chest. This was the first time I'd run into a roadblock or dead end of any sort in the tunnel. Karen could very well be just behind this door. Although if she wasn't, and all that awaited me on the other side was yet another uphill climb… No, I didn't want to consider the possibility. I decided right then and there to make this door the endpoint of my journey. If my little sister wasn't behind it, then I'd stop and take a rest. Gripping the iron handle, I leaned all my weight on the door in an attempt to push it open, since my muscles lacked the strength to do so on their own.

"Ngh!"

As soon as the door swung open, my legs gave out from under me, and I collapsed forward, my forehead slamming against the ground. Yet it didn't hurt, because my fall was cushioned by a soft, shimmering blanket of sand.

"What…?"

The sand was warm against my face, and I felt rays of sunlight streaming down my cheeks. Had I finally made it outside? Lifting my head, I got a big whiff of salt and brine as a gust of wind blew by, sending my bangs fluttering in the breeze. Impossible though it seemed, I found myself lying facedown on a white sandy beach with an endless ocean spread out before my eyes, its waters the deepest of blues, yet crystal clear all the way to the horizon.

I sat up on my knees and looked behind me. An old, dilapidated cabin gazed listlessly over the shore, its front door made from the same weathered wood as the one I'd stumbled out of. Yet there was no tunnel behind the cabin, only a grassy meadow covered in lush new greenery. I paid it little mind. Whatever part of my brain was responsible for making sense of things had long since gone into a state of numb paralysis. Right now, the only thing that mattered to me was whether my sister was here. Squeezing every last drop of remaining energy from the tattered old dishrag my body had become, I called her name at the top of my lungs.

"Karen!"

Over heeere, I heard a lackadaisical voice call back.

I turned my head in the direction the reply had come from.

A girl was standing right there on the beach. Her ponytail dangled out from the back of her baseball cap. Her loose-fitting tank top hung halfway down over her denim shorts. Her bright red sandals were half-buried in the flowing golden sand.

It was her. It was Karen.

“You finally made it, Kaoru,” she said with a smile that could outshine a thousand stars.

All at once, my body went limp and my vision grew dark as my mind finally released its tenuous grip on consciousness.

I was in the midst of a peaceful sleep. As I lay on my back, a gentle breeze blew against my body, its angle shifting to and fro in a slow, methodical pattern as the tiny motor on the oscillating fan hummed softly. A futon was rolled out beneath me. When I tried to turn my head slightly, I heard the chaff of the buckwheat seeds inside my pillow shift and scrape against one another. The sweet, earthy scent of the tatami mats under my body soothed my nostrils. It felt like I was sinking slowly into a thick, viscous pool of liquid comfort. I felt all my exhaustion, all my stress being purged from my body by those purifying waters. I didn’t want to get up. I didn’t want to open my eyes. I wanted to lie there and sleep forever… And honestly, why shouldn’t I be allowed to do that? I’d been busting my ass for so long that surely no one would think less of me for that. *Man, the breeze from that fan feels nice… Wait. What was I busting my ass for, again?*

“Oh, right!”

The moment I remembered my purpose, I shot up in bed. Through the opened screen door, I saw the ocean past the veranda. I surveyed my surroundings. I was lying in the middle of a room lined with sun-bleached tatami mats, with a hanging wall scroll in the alcove featuring a tranquil mountain scene. It was a room I’d been in before. Many times, in fact… *Hang on a minute.*

“I’m back at my house…?”

How could that be? I’d run myself half to death trying to make it through the Urashima Tunnel, and now I was sleeping soundly in my own home? I wasn’t wearing the clothes I’d worn into the tunnel either—just a ratty old T-shirt and some shorts. Could it be that…it was all a dream? Had there never been an Urashima Tunnel to begin with? No, that couldn’t be it. I would never fall asleep like this in the sitting room. Besides, there were two huge differences between this room and the one at my house. The first

being that you couldn’t see even a smidge of the ocean from my home, just the overgrown backyard and the mountain behind it. The second being that something major was missing from this one: Karen’s memorial altar. It was nowhere to be—

“Oh, hey! You’re awake!” said a voice.

A voice that belonged to my little sister Karen.

She came rushing over to me, her bare feet stamping against the tatami flooring.

“Boy, you just up and passed out all of a sudden! I had to drag you all the way here myself. You’ve gotten pretty darn heavy, you know that?”

She was right here in front of me. Talking, laughing. Neither her face nor her voice had aged a day since the last time I saw her, when she was ten years old.

“You were all covered in sweat, so I went ahead and changed you into a fresh set of clothes too! You owe me big-time, buster!” Karen placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her cheeks in her trademark pouting pose. “Hey, are you even listening to me?!”

She brought her face in close to mine, and I finally snapped back to my senses.

“K-Karen? Is that…really you? Y-you’re not just…a figment of my imagination or something, are you?” I sputtered, fumbling over every other word.

“Wow, rude! See for yourself, why don’t you? Here!” Karen plopped to her knees and grabbed my hand, then placed my palm against her cheek. Her face was soft and warm, but most of all, undeniably real. “See?”

Karen smiled and cocked her head, looking for agreement on my part, so I nodded feebly. She definitely wasn’t an illusion, but this was all happening so fast that it still wasn’t quite registering in my brain. Seeing Karen in the flesh, then waking up in this weird alternate-universe version of my house… Having to process all of these impossible stimuli had sent my brain into a nuclear meltdown, and it refused to acknowledge any one of

them as real. So I simply sat there, looking at Karen in a daze, until eventually my stomach let out a mighty growl.

"Oh? Are you hungry, Kaoru?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'm not, like…"

Just as I was about to say "starving or anything," I felt an intense pang in my empty stomach and a fierce thirst in my throat. I'd only forgotten them briefly because the shock and confusion at all that was happening had fried my other senses. To be sure, I was absolutely famished, and more than that, I needed water. Desperately. Toward the end there, I'd run for several hours without a single drop.

"S-sorry, Karen…but could you bring me something to drink?"

"Sure thing. We've got a lot to choose from, though. What would you like?"

"Anything's fine, just…bring a lot of it…"

"*Anything*, you say? Hmmm… Well, okay!" she responded peppily, then got up and headed into the kitchen with a skip in her step. Meanwhile, I was coming down with a bit of a headache, so I vigorously rubbed my temples. This was more of an information overload than my poor brain could handle. I didn't know where to begin trying to make sense of it all. As I gazed blankly out over the ocean, I heard a high-pitched mechanical whir coming from inside the kitchen. Karen must have been using the blender. What in the world was she mixing up for me?

"Okay, all done!" Karen came into the room with a large cup and the removable pitcher from our old electric blender. There was a thick, whitish liquid inside. *Wait, is that…*

"Did you make banana juice?"

"You betcha!"

She held up the pitcher triumphantly, grinning from ear to ear as the liquid jostled around in the container and nearly spilled over the rim. Now *this* took me back—she and I had made banana juice together all the time. However, ever since she died, I hadn't made it once, using the convenient justification that the blender was too much trouble to clean.

“Here ya go, Kaoru!”

The sweet smell of banana passed through my nostrils as I took the cup from Karen and proceeded to drink it down. At our house, we always added a whole lot of milk per banana, so it came out extra smooth. I downed the entire thing, never once lowering the cup from my lips until it was drained of every last drop.

“Whew…”

All I could do was let out a sigh of contentment. I wasn’t sure a drink had ever left me so satisfied. My throat tingled with sugary goodness. As I went to pour myself another glass, I heard the ding of the microwave going off in the kitchen.

“Oh, yay! The food’s ready.”

“We’re having food?”

“Yep. Or, well, *you* are, at least. I made it, though! Go wait in the living room, and I’ll have it right out.” Karen dashed off into the kitchen yet again.

Wow, little Karen’s making food all by herself, eh…? I found this extremely bizarre, yet I rose from my futon all the same, bringing the juice cup and pitcher with me into the living room. There on the low dining table, I found a big jumbo bowl of fancy instant soba noodles, as well as three grilled rice balls (microwaved from frozen) sitting in a row. Karen was seated on one of the floor cushions, looking up at me with pride. I couldn’t help but crack a smile. *Yeah, that’s about what I should have expected.*

“Well, enjoy!”

“Thanks… Will do.”

I sat next to Karen and picked up my chopsticks, clapped my hands together, then dug straight into the bowl of noodles. I dipped the crunchy dehydrated tempura puck into the broth a little bit, letting it soak up the savory shrimp flavor, and took a nibble. Then I tried the noodles. Normally, the flavor would have been a little much for me, but in my current state of exhaustion, it was like the nectar of the gods. My taste buds savored each

and every drop of the salty broth. *Man, I don't remember these things tasting so good…*

I kept slurping up soba noodles like nobody's business, only stopping to take a bite of one of the fried rice balls or to cool my mouth off with a sip of banana juice. It wasn't the best drink pairing for a meal like this, admittedly, but I could hardly complain when I was prepared to devour anything and everything in sight without even remembering to breathe. I felt all five of my senses slowly growing clearer and clearer with every bite of chewed-up food matter I gulped down my throat. This was beyond the realm of deliciousness—I felt like a cadaver returned to life.

After guzzling the last drop of remaining broth, I set the bowl on the table. Satisfied, I opened my eyes again, and finally, I could truly appreciate the beautiful sight laid out before me. It was a scene that I'd been trying to recapture for what felt like ages: Karen and I, merely existing in the same space, enjoying our carefree lives together.

"So how was it?" she asked with a smile. This was the first time I was cognizant enough to truly recognize and appreciate her as Karen, my little sister. The moment I did, the flood of emotions I'd bottled up for years came rushing to the surface, crashing over me in waves. Every little detail about her was so vivid, so exactly the way I remembered it. Everything from her smile, to the way she breathed, to her tiny mannerisms, all the way down to how each individual strand of hair in her bangs swayed back and forth with every slight movement of her head. Suddenly, my vision blurred, and I heard a single water droplet *plip* into the empty noodle container. The dam burst, and that first drop was followed by an endless stream of tears as I broke down into a sniveling, sobbing mess. The tears were hot against my cheeks, and it was all I could do to keep myself from bawling loudly and inconsolably.

Then Karen reached out and ran her fingers through my hair, tracing her soft little hands up and down the length of my scalp. "You've been trying so hard for so long, Big Brother."

There was a maternal gentleness to her tone, almost as though the words radiated actual heat that melted something cold and hard inside of me.

I nodded. I nodded over and over.

After thanking her for the meal and cleaning up after myself, I'd finally managed to calm down quite a bit. That was the most satisfying meal I'd had in my entire life thus far. My chest was still fluttering with euphoric contentment. "…Hey, Karen."

"Yeah?"

I had to ask her something, now that I was once more in a sound state of mind. Something I absolutely had to verify, even if I wouldn't like the answer. "Are you…actually the real Karen?"

Karen groaned, putting her elbows on the table and resting her head in her hands. "This *again*? You really can't tell, huh? I thought I told you, I'm—" she began, then stopped short as her lips curled into a mischievous grin. "Well, which do *you* think I am, Kaoru? The real Karen or an impostor?"

"Hey, don't answer my question with another question."

"But it's more fun that way!" Karen flashed her canines. To be sure, it was hard to feel that annoyed when I knew it was all in good fun for her. "Well, Kaoru? C'mon, let's hear it. Which do you think I am?"

It seemed I had no choice but to play along with her little game.

"I think…" I inhaled a shallow breath. Karen looked at me with innocent eyes, eagerly awaiting my answer. "I think you're the real one."

"Is that your *final* answer?"

"Y-yeah."

"Well, there you go, then! Don't let me tell you any different."

I'd seen the anticlimactic punch line coming, yet it still earned my groan. Surprisingly, this joke answer actually resonated with me, and I was pretty satisfied with it. In the end, there was really no way to know if this Karen was an elaborate fake conjured by the tunnel to deceive me, nor any clear definition of what "real" meant in a supernatural situation like this. In

that case, all I could really do was believe what I wanted to believe. That's what I assumed Karen was trying to tell me.

"You're right. All that matters is that you're real to me…" I agreed, hoping that by saying it aloud, it might make it feel more like the truth.

"Anyway, enough about that! We've got watermelon in the fridge, Kaoru! We should have some!"

"Sounds like a plan."

I decided that worrying about it any further wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I stood up, and we headed to the kitchen. Opening the door to the fridge, I saw that inside, there was indeed a plate of sliced watermelon covered in plastic wrap. Below that were a variety of other treats, as well as a vast assortment of drinks, just like Karen had said, including a few bottles of Cheerio and Lifeguard. I didn't know where she'd gotten all this stuff, but something told me it would be pointless to ask.

We sat on the veranda and sank our teeth into the juicy watermelon, its ice-cold flesh gushing sweet nectar directly into our mouths. It had to be the best watermelon I'd ever tasted. When Karen started spitting the seeds into the yard, I followed suit. Soon, all-out war began as we duked it out to see who could spit their seeds the farthest. It was so much fun, I actually started crying.

"Sheesh, Kaoru! Since when have you been such a crybaby? Aren't you supposed to be the older sibling here?"

"Yeah… You got me there," I replied, sniffling. "But you can't blame me. People actually cry more when they're older, y'know. 'Cause they get more sappy and sentimental about stuff."

"They do?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure I read that somewhere."

"Huh. I thought people were only supposed to get tougher when they grew up." Karen swung her legs back and forth as they dangled over the edge of the veranda.

"Well, some do, that's for sure. I knew one person who was *very* tough."

“Yeah? What were they like?”

“Oh, man… Where do I even begin?”

Incidentally, it was Anzu who had immediately popped into my mind.

“She was the prettiest girl you ever saw, but could hold her own in a fistfight right up there with the best of ’em. This one time, she stood up to a *super* intimidating guy who was way bigger and older than her, but even when he started slapping her across the face and kicking her in the stomach, she didn’t bend or break… She kept her cool and waited for an opening to strike back. That’s the sort of girl she was. At first, I was honestly kind of afraid of her, but once we started spending time together, I realized she’s actually pretty damn cute once you get to know her…”

“Do you have a crush on her, Kaoru?” Karen asked, looking up at me with pure, wide-eyed curiosity.

I set my half-eaten slice of watermelon on the plate and gazed out over the ocean. “…Yeah. I think I do, actually.”

Karen let out a high-pitched squeal of scandalized glee, then scooted closer. “Well, if you like her so much, how come you’re not together?”

“Well, she’s got her own stuff she needs to focus on right now.”

“You still want to be with her though, right? Isn’t it lonely being here without her?”

“I mean…yeah, it definitely is. But see…”

Karen stared at me with rapt attention, awaiting my reply. I couldn’t bring myself to shrug her off or lie about this.

“…The truth is, I… I don’t feel like I should be permitted to really, genuinely love somebody like that.”

Only after the words had left my lips did I realize that this was probably the first time I’d ever uttered the word “love” about a specific person, in a romantic context, and meant it. Now that I had, I couldn’t help but smile sheepishly to dampen how embarrassing it was to admit. I still meant what I said, though. At the end of the day, it was my negligence that had killed Karen. Moreover, I was the one who had caused the original rift

between my mother and father, which had led her to leave us and him to hit rock bottom. I would have to be a pretty disgusting, selfish human being to ignore all the pain and suffering I'd caused to go prancing off into the sunset for my own happily ever after.

"Granted, I know that sounds dumb," I continued. "I mean, it's not like anyone's forcing me to bear that cross. It's self-inflicted suffering at this point. Guess it's the one thing I can't seem to get past, for whatever reason… But I dunno. Maybe this is all a little too grown-up for you to understand."

"Nuh-uh!" Karen pouted, scrunching her face. "I totally understand! Being permitted is like…when you have to get your parents to sign a piece of paper to go on a field trip, right?"

"Ha ha. Well, that too, yeah."

"Do you really need a permit to love someone, though?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't say that. I think everyone's born with that right. But I also think it's possible to lose it, under certain circumstances… I dunno. It's kinda hard to explain…"

"Hrmm… Well, in that case, I'll have to give you a new one!"

Karen shot up and dashed into the hall. I heard her speedy footsteps thump-thump-thumping up the stairs. Less than a minute later, she barreled onto the veranda with a set of markers and some white printer paper in her hands.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"Heh heh heh… Watch *this*! …Actually, no! You can't look yet! Turn the other way!"

Sheesh, make up your mind, you crazy kid.

I did as I was told nonetheless. All I could hear was the sound of her markers squeaking loudly against the paper, only pausing occasionally when she stopped and pondered aloud how to write a certain character or realized she'd made a mistake. By the time I finished what remained of my half-eaten slice of watermelon, she informed me that I was finally allowed

to look. When I turned, I saw Karen in a formal seating position, facing me with her hands on her knees and her butt on her heels.

“Okay! Allow me to present your replacement permit!” she began, then held the sheet of paper in front of her face as she proceeded to read off what she’d written. “Ahem. Big Br—I mean, Kaoru Tono, in honor of how hard you worked coming all the way in here to find me, I hereby grant you the right to love again! If you want to, that is! Anyway, congrats!”

She held the sheet of paper toward me with both hands. I looked down to see the words “LOVE PERMIT” written in big bubble letters at the top, surrounded by all sorts of colorful little doodles: flowers, a little doggie, and so on. It was very cute. Yet I found myself unable to reach out and accept it from her.

“What’s the matter, Kaoru? Go on, take it.”

A warm sensation bubbled up from the pit of my stomach. Ever since the day we lost Karen, I’d been languishing. Distressed. Constantly tormented by the fact that I was still here, but she wasn’t. I desperately wanted to be punished for having been unable to save her, yet I couldn’t think of a single way in which I could ever properly atone. So I simply refused to allow myself even the slightest bit of happiness, hoping that might alleviate some small fraction of my guilt. I was prepared to live out the rest of my days this way, like a monk who’d sworn off worldly desires. Yet now, thanks to Karen, I… I…

Of course. It was all so clear to me now. There was no longer a shred of doubt in my mind. The Urashima Tunnel didn’t have the power to grant wishes.

All it could do was help you reclaim the things you’d lost.

That was the tunnel’s true power. Karen’s sandal, our old pet parakeet, the days when my mother and father and I all lived happily together—even Karen herself. And now my ability to love another human

being. These were all things that I'd lost somewhere along the way, and which the tunnel had given me a chance to reclaim.

"Um, Kaoru? If you don't want this, I'm gonna throw it out."

"W-wait, no! I do want it. I really, really do…"

I frantically reached out and took the Love Permit with both hands. As I touched it, an exhilarating electric feeling ran through my fingertips, then coursed up my arms and through my entire body. It was just a thin sheet of printer paper, yet it held deep emotional value that went beyond appraisal. I sat there frozen in place for a while, soaking in the sensation of holding it in my hands. It felt like I was finally free, after all these years spent captive to my own self-loathing.

"…Thank you, Karen. I promise I'll treasure it always."

"Mm-hmm! Please do!"

"And, um… Sorry, I know I only just got here, but…" I smiled sheepishly, hoping once again that it might take the edge off the extremely embarrassing line I was about to say. "I feel like…I'm ready to try to love someone again."

When I went up to my bedroom, I found that my backpack had already been set out for me, almost as if Karen had foreseen this turn of events. I slung it over my shoulder and headed to the kitchen. Opening the fridge door, I grabbed enough food for two and crammed it into the main pouch. I now knew approximately how long the tunnel was and thus how much food and water we would need. As long as neither of us suffered any injuries on the way out, we would be able to make it back without too much trouble. We were all set to go whenever. I slipped the Love Permit into a sheet protector to keep it from getting creased and slid that into my backpack as well before heading to the sitting room.

"Hey, Karen," I called, and she turned from her seat on the veranda, still chewing a mouthful of watermelon. "Let's leave this place. Together."

I had to bring Karen with me to Kozaki. That was my original objective, even if the comfort of this illusory home had caused me to

momentarily forget it. However, until both of us were out safely on the other end of the tunnel, I couldn't call my mission complete.

"Where are we going?" she asked "Down to the beach?"

"Somewhere even better. Where there are aquariums, and zoos, and all sorts of different things. I'll take you anywhere in the world, as long as it isn't here."

"But we *do* have aquariums and zoos here. And amusement parks. And indoor water parks. Anything you could ever want."

I knew Karen had to be telling the truth. If my own house had been replicated, then the sky was the limit. Nevertheless, that wouldn't be enough for me.

"No, Karen. I mean, sure, maybe you're right. Maybe this paradise really does have everything I could ever want. But it isn't where we belong. We have to go back to Kozaki."

"No way." Karen took another big ol' bite of watermelon. Chewed. Swallowed. "I've gotten used to being here. I don't think I've got what it takes to live out there anymore."

"Of course you do!" I dropped to my knees and made intense eye contact with her as I slammed my fist against my chest. "I'll make sure there's a place for you out there again, I promise. I'll find a way to make it work, and I won't let anyone get in our way."

I knew it wouldn't be easy for Karen, returning to a society that had marked her as long deceased. However, I meant what I said, and I was fully confident that I could pull it off somehow. For Karen, I could do anything.

"So please, won't you come with me?" I pleaded.

Karen finished her slice of watermelon and set it on the plate, then let out an exaggerated sigh, like a troublemaking kid who'd been caught red-handed. "…Okay, fiiine. You win, I guess."

"Sweet! Then let's get going!" I exclaimed, grabbing Karen by the hand and heading for the front door. Then I remembered something. "Oh, crap! The time!"

Oh God. I'd been so caught up in catching up with Karen that I'd wholly forgotten. I was about to rush into the living room to check the time…then quickly realized that none of the clocks here would properly reflect how much time had actually passed since I'd entered the tunnel. I had to check the wristwatch I'd strapped on at the start of this journey. I wasn't wearing it anymore, so where was it? Maybe Karen had taken it off when she changed my clothes.

"Hey, Karen, you wouldn't happen to know where my watch is, would you?"

"Oh, you mean this?" Karen reached into her pocket and pulled it out. In a rush of anxiety and relief, I snatched the watch from her grasp and checked the time. It read half past five, and I'd entered the tunnel at midnight. The last time I remembered checking my watch, the little hand had been pointing to the two—but I knew it had already done a full rotation by that point, so that implied that it had been not five and a half hours but seventeen and a half… Yet even that seemed a little odd.

"Hey, Karen…? How long was I asleep after I got here?"

"Oh, you were zonked out for a *while.* Like half a day, probably."

I froze. If I'd slept for twelve hours, then that implied the little hand had made two full rotations and was working on its third, which meant…I'd been in the tunnel for going on *thirty hours* now. A cold sweat rolled down my forehead.

"W-we've gotta go, right now! I've been in here for way too long!"

I grabbed Karen by the hand and hurried out the front door. One step off the porch, and my foot sank into the sand. The house stood on the boundary between a grassy meadow and the beach. There were no roads or utility poles to be seen anywhere. The utter impossibility of maintaining a permanent residence in a place like this only drove home the fact that this world was an illusion. I quickly spotted the tiny shack from which I'd originally emerged. It wasn't far at all from the house. We made our way across the beach until we stood before its old wooden door.

"Okay, Karen… You ready?"

“…Yeah.” She looked pensive, gripping the lower hem of her tank top as she stared anxiously at the ground.

“It’ll be okay. No need to be afraid. It’s a long way back, but I promise we’ll make it.”

This did little to visibly reassure her. Regardless, we didn’t have time to just stand around. The clock was ticking, second by second, hour by hour. Determined not to waste any more time, I reached out and slowly creaked open the door. Beyond it was the steep downhill slope I’d nearly killed myself climbing on the way to this place. Thankfully, the return trip would be easier on our stamina, though we’d still need to be careful not to trip and fall.

“All right, let’s do this.”

I took my first step through the door. As soon as I did, Karen wrapped her arms around my waist from behind. I turned my head to look over my shoulder, but I couldn’t see her face on account of it being buried into my backpack. All I knew was that I was standing on one side of the door, and she was still standing ankle-deep in the sand on the other.

“Karen? What’s the matter?”

“There’s someone out there who means the world to you, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, and I can’t keep her waiting any longer. That’s why we need to leave.”

“I’m so glad. You’re finally ready to move forward again.”

“…Karen?”

Her little hands squeezed tight on the fabric of my shirt. “Come on, Kaoru. You already know what I’m about to say, don’t you?”

I felt an uncomfortable palpitation in my heart, and my breaths grew fewer and further between. I furrowed my brow. “…No, Karen. I really don’t. Why don’t you spell it out for me?”

“Well…think about it like this. Clownfish can only live in the sea. If you tried to take one and put it in a river, it would only choke and die.

They’re weak that way. All they can really do is hide in their little anemone friends and watch the bigger, stronger fish from afar. Like salmon, for example. They can live in the ocean or in fresh water. They can swim upstream, then back down again as many times as they want. Heck, they can even jump up waterfalls. And on top of all that, they’re really yummy to eat.”

“Well, yeah. You’ve got that right. I really don’t see how this has anything to do with our current situation, though.”

“It has everything to do with it. You’re like a salmon, Kaoru. But me? I’m a weak little clownfish, stuck here in my—”

“Don’t say that!” I shouted out. “You’re Karen! You’re a human being, not a clownfish or a salmon! You can go anywhere you want. So please, don’t say stuff like that… You’re killing me here…”

I’d spent so much time—in more ways than one—trying to make it here. I couldn’t possibly return by myself.

“It’s okay, Kaoru. I’ll always be with you. Whenever you need me, I’ll be right there by your side… So please.” Karen released her grip on my shirt. “Don’t worry about me. Go out there and live like you mean it. Just like you told her.”

She pushed me from behind—only gently, but it was enough to make me lose my balance and stumble forward into the tunnel.

“Karen!” I screamed, whirling around.

Karen wasn’t there. Nor did any trace remain of the wooden door, or the dazzling sunlight, or the white sandy beach, or even the lingering scent of salt water. It was just an infinite tunnel again, stretching out in both directions. It felt like all the air had been vacuumed out from my lungs. I started walking deeper into the tunnel, trying desperately to find the door to that dreamy shore once again.

Then I heard a voice ring out in my head. *“Go out there and live like you mean it. Just like you told her.”*

Just like I told her. It went without saying who “her” was. Karen was telling me to stop letting myself be dragged down by the past and start

looking toward the future—to find my place in the world, right alongside Anzu. That was her final message to me as my little sister.

“Nnngh…!”

I held my head in my hands, digging my fingers into my scalp. I closed my eyes as tightly as I could, yet still the tears found a way out.

“Nnnnnngh…!”

Some small part of me deep down had nursed an inkling that things would turn out like this. The Urashima Tunnel’s true power was to help you retrieve what you’d lost, after all. It had given me the chance to see Karen, as well as my right to love another person. It had given me something else too, without me realizing it: my ability to stand tall and look reality in the face. To leave the pain of the past behind and start living in the now. In order to do that, though, I would have to actually learn to move on from my sister’s death, which was diametrically opposed to my original goal of bringing her out of the tunnel with me. I had to choose one or the other.

I was confident that the tunnel had no will of its own, let alone ill will. My guess was that its manifestations of the things I’d lost were all automatic. So if a contradiction like this was occurring inside it, I had to assume it could only mean that there was already a part of me, deep down, that had unconsciously chosen to start facing reality again. A part of me that had accepted Karen’s death. I should have known. I just hadn’t been able to let go of that last sliver of hope I’d clung to for so long—that maybe one day, a miracle would occur, and those happy days we shared as a family would return.

It was a naive, starry-eyed dream, to be sure. But it was finally time for me to wake up. I gritted my teeth so hard that it felt like they might fissure and crack. I tensed my abs, trying my best to seal off the emotions billowing up inside of me and threatening to explode. I forced them down, deeper and deeper, then shut the lid tight, locked them away behind padlock after padlock, and threw away the keys. I wiped my eyes with my forearm from side to side and cried out at the top of my lungs.

“Karennn! I’m headed out noooow!”

With that, I turned and started running as fast as I could toward the exit.

“Okay. Love you,” I could almost hear her calling back.

TOTAL TIME ELAPSED: 29 HRS 35 MINS (OUTSIDE: 8 YEARS, 36 DAYS)

I sprinted desperately through the darkness, throwing myself downhill at nearly the fastest speed my legs could manage. The weight of my backpack, its straps chafing my shoulders as it bounced up and down, was definitely draining my stamina faster than it would have otherwise, but it also made me feel a lot more reassured than I had coming in. I knew that I had enough water and food to make it out, so I didn’t have to worry about starving to death. It was purely a question of stamina and how fast I could make it outside.

My heart pounded so loudly that I could hear it in my ears. With each step, a pain shot through my knees that made me worry they might crack and crumble to bits. My throat was hoarse and raw from the intense rate at which I huffed air in and out of my lungs. I was in pain. I was exhausted. Nevertheless, I couldn’t rest. Maybe at some point I would let myself stop to take a single breather along the way, sure, but it was still too early for that.

Anzu was waiting for me outside, and I couldn’t wait to see her again. Assuming she’d never tried to enter the tunnel, she was twenty-five years old by this point. Though I had told her that she shouldn’t feel like she had to wait around for me, so I assumed she hadn’t. Maybe she already had a boyfriend. Maybe she’d forgotten all about me. Hell, maybe she was married with kids. I didn’t care. I wanted to know what sort of life she’d led over the months and years I’d spent running around in this musty old cave. Perhaps more than anything, I wanted to read whatever new stories she had written. God, there were so many things I wanted to do!

With a firm next step, I kicked off the ground and picked up the pace. I didn't feel any pain or exhaustion at this point—my hopes and dreams for the future served as a powerful anesthetic to numb me from both. I hoped this adrenaline rush would last me long enough to make it all the way outside.

It was strange, though. It was almost like the more I ran, the more stamina I gained and the faster I went. This momentum didn't last for long, because just then, as I rushed downhill, my legs got caught on one another, and I went tumbling forward. My vision spun into a dizzy blur as my body rolled down the steep incline, battered and bruised by the rocky floor with every rotation, and only stopping when my head crashed hard into a pillar of one of the torii. Even then, I got right back up and started running again. A trickle of liquid dripped into my eye. Thinking it was sweat, I reached up to wipe it away—but my fingers came back red. I was bleeding from my skull, apparently. I paid it no mind. I kept on running.

I had to hurry. The world wasn't going to wait for me any longer. I needed to go faster. Then faster still. I didn't care how black and blue, how bloodied and bruised I got. Nothing would stop me. Nothing would get in my way. For as long as the flow of time kept moving forward, I would keep running. Even if my legs gave out from under me, I would keep on going. I would claw myself out until my fingernails were shredded if I had to.

"Graaaagh!" I screamed. I knew it was nothing but a waste of valuable energy, but I couldn't help it. I had to let out the raging whirlwind of emotions inside me. Yet still my legs strove frantically onward, even when my vision began to blur and I couldn't make out where I was going. I tripped and fell again and again. However, each and every time, I got right back up. No matter what happened, I refused to give in.

I kept on running.

***

I'd been running for so long. Where to, I didn't know. For what, I couldn't say. Maybe I was chasing something, or maybe something was

chasing me. All I knew was that I'd been running for a long, long time. Still to this day, I hadn't stopped. I kept moving forward, swinging my arms back and forth, even when my feet felt more bruised and blistered with every step… Or at least, I *thought* I was moving forward. Even so, no matter how much time passed, it seemed like I couldn't reach the finish line.

"Mmngh…"

I awoke with a terrible kink in my neck. I peeled my right cheek off the cold, hard tabletop and lifted my head. Apparently I'd fallen asleep while working at my desk. I could feel my joints creaking as if I were a machine in desperate need of an oil change. I glanced at the digital table clock—it was three in the morning. I stood from my chair and stretched a bit, cracking my lower back with a satisfying pop. The thick scent of ink and wood pulp hung heavy in the air of my silent, sleepy bedroom. As I looked at the heaping stacks of paper spread all over my writing desk, I decided it was about time to call it quits for the night. I'd clean up, take a shower, and then hop into bed for some actual rest. Before I did that, I wanted to finish one last scene. I twisted my shoulders from side to side, then sat down, put pen back to paper, and started inking my streaky pencil lines once more.

That fateful day, when Kaoru ran off into the Urashima Tunnel without me, I did try to chase after him at first, even after reading the letter he'd left for me at the entrance. I figured that even if he'd gotten a several-day head start, that would only amount to like a minute of time in the tunnel, so I could catch up with him easily. Then something stopped me.

"*Whatever it is you think you might find in here, you don't really need it. What you really need is to make a name for yourself as a manga artist ASAP.*"

I got all the way to the boundary where the torii began, but that one line from his letter was like a ball and chain around my ankle, tethering me to the outside world and refusing to let me go inside. In a way, it was almost

like he'd cast a spell on me, because now, it felt like if I didn't pursue this manga opportunity, I'd be directly betraying Kaoru. So in the end, I couldn't do it. I had to turn back.

When I first read the letter, I managed to stay surprisingly calm about the whole thing, though in retrospect, it was just that I couldn't bring myself to fully confront the harsh reality that I'd been left behind. Then again, thanks to that, I was able to keep a level head and make the right decision, so it was still a net positive. The first thing I did upon making it home that day was call my editor to tell him I'd changed my mind and that I wanted to work with him after all. Thankfully, despite my selfish flip-flopping, he welcomed me back with open arms, and he even said he was glad to hear it.

From that day forward, I devoted myself wholeheartedly to drawing manga in a professional capacity. Even so, all the while, I was waiting. Waiting for Kaoru to return to me.

For the remainder of my high school career, I continued attending Kozaki High and sent whatever projects I'd written in my spare time to my editor through the mail. I faced a whole lot of rejection at first, and I lost more competitions than I could count, but eventually my hard work paid off and I actually won one: I got a short, self-contained story published in a magazine. Obviously, I was satisfied with this result, but at the time, it was hard to feel truly elated. I wasn't unhappy with my work or anything, mind you, I was just upset with the way things had been going at school.

All of our classmates seemed to have forgotten about Kaoru entirely. Sure, he was the talk of the class for a short while when he stopped coming to school and word got out that he'd run away from home, but by the time our senior year began, everyone was too swamped with entrance exams and worrying about their career paths to mention him beyond the occasional "Oh yeah, what ever happened to that guy?"

I couldn't help but be reminded of the immense primal fear I'd felt as a child when I saw how quickly everyone moved on from my grandfather's death—my first experience with existential dread. However, the thought of Kaoru's existence fading into memory scared me even more than that, so I

made a point to always keep him at the forefront of my mind, thinking about him more than anyone else in the world. When I graduated from high school and my editor suggested I move to Tokyo to try to get experience as a live-in assistant for a more well-known manga artist, I immediately turned him down, insisting on staying right in Kozaki. I rented a small one-bedroom apartment in town, and thus began my life as a full-time author.

Of course, both of my parents were vehemently opposed to my pursuit of a career in manga in lieu of further education; they'd always been huge sticklers about that sort of thing. Moreover, my determination was too strong to let them stop me. It was too late. I'd made the choice to devote my entire life to writing manga, knowing full well they'd likely disown me for it. I spent every hour of every day crafting worlds and characters and stories. This hard work soon bore fruit, however. Only a year out of high school, I managed to secure a deal for my very first serialization. That was when things started to get *really* busy. My required daily workload increased by several orders of magnitude, and I only got about half as much sleep as I had in high school, if I was lucky. Yet for how grueling the lifestyle of a serialized manga artist could be, it certainly served as a potent anesthetic to distract from the constant pangs of anxiety that stabbed at my chest every other waking hour of my life. Not a day went by that the dread of not knowing when Kaoru might return didn't rattle me to my core.

Despite the extremely demanding deadlines of my writing schedule, I still managed to fit in a sliver of spare time here and there to stop by the Urashima Tunnel. Usually, I just sat right at the entrance and started mumbling incoherently to myself, maybe talk about how work was coming along on my current manga. Every once in a while, I tried calling Kaoru's name. It was a bit like visiting someone's grave to pay respects, though I never went so far as to leave flowers on the ground outside or anything. Although I did write a little letter for him each and every time I visited the tunnel, in which I'd relate whatever was going on in my life along with my updated contact information, and left it in a bottle inside the tunnel like he'd done for me—though I never saw any indication that he or anyone else had ever opened it up and read a single one.

Tell me, Tono-kun. Just how much longer do I have to wait?

Or was waiting my first mistake?

I knew it was pointless to waste my breath on questions that would only go unanswered. The moment they left my lips, they would be swallowed up into the fathomless void that was the Urashima Tunnel. Just like everything else.

A year into my first serialization deal, my story finally hit its stride. I could see the broad strokes of where I wanted it to finish out. All I had to do was pile on chapter after gripping chapter and pepper in enough foreshadowing throughout to make the big finale the best it could possibly be. Thankfully, I'd finally gotten the hang of my rigorous publishing schedule, and I even had a little bit of free time now—though perhaps by corollary, this also meant that I spent a lot more time thinking about Kaoru. The hotter months were always the hardest; they reminded me of that dreamlike summer when he and I spent nearly every single day together, and we were both each other's worlds entire.

Those had been the fullest, most memorable months of my life. Every day a new thrill, a fresh adventure to discover. Yet lately, thinking back on it would bring about a sharp pain in my chest, like I'd been stabbed with a knife. Then the anxiety seeped in through the stab wound to slowly gnaw at my heart.

What if Kaoru had made it out of the Urashima Tunnel a long time ago? What if he was secretly living a new happy life in a better place, unbeknownst to me? What if he simply wanted nothing to do with me anymore, and that was why he hadn't attempted to contact me? Eventually, it got to the point where the anxiety was so strong, I thought it might bore a hole in my chest.

Another two full years came and went.

My first manga series was finally complete. Not discontinued or truncated in the slightest; I managed to put every bit of the story I wanted to tell on paper. I was also extremely satisfied with how well I'd wrapped things up. It was the exact perfect conclusion I'd envisioned before the story even started publication. The readers seemed to love it too.

Yet my depressive funk showed no signs of letting up. Now that I'd lost my serialized gig, I couldn't coast through life on that alone. It was like I'd been thrown off the rails, tossed back to fend for myself in the jungle at night with no direction on where to go. My editor told me that I should work on submitting a rough draft for a new story concept. That made sense, obviously. As an author, once I'd finished telling one story, it was time to move on to the next. That was simply the cycle of being a professional manga artist. Yet, though I now had full confidence in my abilities as a storyteller, I wasn't completely convinced that this was what I, Anzu Hanashiro the human being, truly wanted. Or to put it more simply, I was lost, unsure of where my life should go next.

Should I try to go look for Kaoru in earnest, or should I write a new manga?

I had to admit, I'd entertained the idea of going into the tunnel and chasing him several times over the years, even despite the massive head start he had by now. Yet every time, I remembered the words in his letter and felt like I owed it to him to really pour my all into my manga career. That, combined with the simple fear of taking on the tunnel and its unknowable nature all by myself, always made me reticent.

Plus, like I said, Kaoru had been in the tunnel for quite some time—probably going on a full day now, by my estimation. One would have thought that would be enough time to make it to the end of *any* tunnel, barring supernatural shenanigans. The fact that he was (to the best of my knowledge) still inside seemed to imply that something truly bad had happened. Maybe he'd fallen into some sort of trap and couldn't get out without help, so he was starving to death. Maybe he'd encountered some horrible abomination and been gravely injured. My mind drafted worst-case scenarios one after another, and with each "what if," my chest grew tighter and tighter. A part of me desperately wanted to rush in and help him.

However, every time I stood before that first torii, I got cold feet and froze in place, unable to move a muscle.

I was a grown adult; gone was the invincible teenager I had once been. I had actual responsibilities now, as well as my long-term financial stability and well-being to think about. The thought of putting myself in *any* sort of danger was pretty terrifying. Even scarier than that, really, was the thought of going in and discovering that Kaoru was nowhere to be found. Like, what if he'd come out of the tunnel and left Kozaki behind without saying a word? Then I'd have thrown away all the success I'd built over the past few years for nothing.

I knew that I should give up on Kaoru and try to forget about him. Really, I did. I knew that constantly obsessing over him after five whole years was unhealthy, plain and simple. Despite that, I couldn't do it. Even after all these years of dashed hopes, whenever I heard my phone vibrate, part of me couldn't help but wonder if it might be him. Every. Single. Time.

So I languished in agony, unable to go after Kaoru, but unable to move on from him, as the weeks and months piled up like so many sheets of crumpled drawing paper. Since when had I been such a spineless coward? I found myself envying the dauntless girl I'd been in days gone by, who'd always been able to maintain an optimistic outlook without effort—without even good reason.

The days rolled by one after another, yet still I failed to come up with any decent ideas for my next big manga series. And of course, I still hadn't heard anything from Kaoru. I *did* receive an invitation to go out to lunch with an old friend—one Koharu Kawasaki. We met up one day at the old café in downtown Kozaki.

"Hey, Anzu! Long time no see, huh?"

"Yeah… No kidding."

We hadn't seen each other once since graduation. We did keep in touch via text for a while, but as my career started picking up steam, even that slowly fell by the wayside—and now we hadn't spoken in almost a year. Seeing Koharu's face again for the first time in so long, I couldn't help

but notice how much softer and friendlier her smile had become. She'd left Kozaki shortly after graduation to get her teaching license at vocational school, and she had apparently scored herself a job teaching elementary school in the city.

When Koharu had first told me, way back in high school, that she wanted to be a teacher when she grew up, I had been genuinely taken aback. So taken aback, in fact, that I'd almost thought she was pulling my leg. Nevertheless, here she was. She'd put together a clear-cut plan, followed it through to the end, and was now a full-fledged teacher, just like she'd said she would be. All the disdain I'd felt toward this one-time bad girl had totally evaporated, and in its place, I felt nothing but genuine respect for her.

We quickly set about catching each other up on what was new and exciting in our respective lives, continuing to make casual small talk between bites after our food arrived.

"Have you been getting enough sleep lately?" Koharu asked at one point.

"Who, me?"

"Yeah, you've got *big* dark circles under your eyes. Are you really still that busy now that your series is finally over?"

"No, not so much, honestly. I've been having trouble falling asleep lately, I guess."

"Wait, you've got insomnia? Is there something that's been stressing you out a lot? Maybe writer's block or something? Can't come up with any new story ideas?"

"Well, yeah. That's part of it too, but…"

"Don't tell me. It's Tono, isn't it?"

I was at a loss for words. I really hadn't expected Koharu to be able to see through me so easily. She made a glum expression for whatever reason, then put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands.

"God, where the heck did that guy run off to…?" she wondered aloud.

For all the complaints I'd had about Koharu back in high school, she was one of the only people I knew who'd remained concerned about Kaoru's sudden disappearance after graduation. I had to respect her for that.

"I mean, what kind of loser runs off and leaves a girl like *you* high and dry, y'know? So help me, if I ever see his stupid mug again, I'm gonna sock him right in the kisser!"

"Oh, *please* do. He deserves it," I said, chuckling.

We ate in silence for a while after that, enjoying the smooth jazz that flowed softly from the restaurant's overhead speakers.

"Hey, Kawasaki?" I asked casually as I twirled some pasta around my fork.

"Mm? What's up?"

"If I told you I was thinking about completely giving up my manga career to go find him, what would you say?"

Koharu's hands instantly stopped, and her eyes went wide as she looked up at me. "Anzu… You're not seriously still in love with that guy, are you?"

"I mean…"

"Look, I know it's really not my place to judge, but don't you think this obsession has gone on long enough? I mean, the guy straight-up vanished on us without giving us a courtesy call. Pretty sure the only way we're ever gonna see him again is if he decides he wants to come back…"

"Yes, I appreciate that, but it doesn't make me miss him any less," I replied, raising my voice a little bit. I was dead serious. The only problem was that, to me, my manga was almost exactly as important as he was.

"I mean…do you really have to pick one or the other here? Can't you go looking for him *while* continuing to write manga?"

"No. Absolutely not. All that'll do is keep me from devoting the proper time and energy to either. No one ever got anywhere by being indecisive."

Koharu furrowed her brow with concern. “Are you sure you’re not burnt out, Anzu? Maybe you should take a little time off, then think this over again with a fresh mind…”

“I can’t do that!” I shouted, finally pushed over the edge. “I can’t stop running. I can’t even slow down. If I do, the anxiety will catch up with me. And once it does, it’ll make everything around me go dark, and I won’t be able to see or think straight. That’s what terrifies me the most. If I’m not doing something to keep my mind occupied, I get paralyzed by all these intrusive thoughts. Though I guess it doesn’t really make a difference, because when I *do* make up my mind to do something, I always end up second-guessing myself anyway, wondering if it’s really the right choice…”

I hung my head, covering my forehead with both hands, and implored: “Tell me, Kawasaki: What am I supposed to do…?”

I knew she wouldn’t have any answers. However, now that the lid was off, I couldn’t help but let all the emotions I’d bottled over the years gush out all at once.

Koharu took a long, unwieldy sip of water before attempting to respond. “Sorry, Anzu…but I really couldn’t tell you. That’s not for me to decide.”

“…I know. Sorry, didn’t mean to kill the mood. Don’t worry about it.” I smiled awkwardly in a futile attempt to mediate my embarrassment and then went back to eating my pasta. It was supposedly the most popular item on the menu, yet at present, it tasted like flavorless sludge. Like nothing at all.

“But y’know what? This kinda takes me back to an old conversation we had,” Koharu said, her expression abruptly turning wistful. “Remember in high school, when you punched me in the face? Then things got a little out of hand, and you guys came over to my place to drop off my summer homework? I remember telling you that I wanted to learn to be just like you. Do you know what you said to me?”

I didn’t respond, so after a short pause, she continued.

“You said that at the end of the day, there’s no one right way to live our lives. All we can do is pick a path and run down it as fast as we can to

see how far we can get in the time that's given to us… Or at least, I'm pretty sure that was it. Maybe I got the wording a little jumbled, but I still remember it plain as day."

All of a sudden, Koharu's lips widened into a broad and all-encompassing smile.

"Those words changed my life, you know. So I figure that if you follow your convictions and stick to the path your gut tells you to, then maybe—just maybe—things will work out the way you want in the end. Just like they did for me."

Koharu's words rang in my ears, then slowly permeated throughout my body. Deep in my chest, I felt a warmth, as though magma was bubbling up from the bottom of my weary heart, dissolving all the clotted dregs of anxiety that had built up inside it over the years. I felt a kind of exhilarating energy return to every corner of my body, one that I hadn't felt in ages. I knew exactly what this strange feeling was—because it was one I used to know. One I used to call my own, once upon a time. It was courage. It was fearlessness.

"I mean, granted, all I'm really doing here is handing your own advice back to you. I still have no idea what I'd recommend, but… Wait, Anzu? Are you okay?"

I hadn't noticed, but tears were streaming down my cheeks. "Kawasaki…"

"Yeah?"

"I think you must be misremembering. I'm pretty sure I never said anything that cool. Either that, or you're embellishing an awful lot."

"Huh?! Y-you think? Oh God, that's embarrassing… Sorry, it's just been so long, and…"

"No, it's fine… I appreciate it." I dabbed my eyes with one of the warm moist towels the server had brought to the table. How had I not realized any of this before? It was all stuff that I was supposed to know, but somewhere along the way, I had apparently lost sight of it all. "…God, I'm so stupid."

It was like someone had flipped the switch. Now my eyes were wide open, and I could see the road ahead once more. I grabbed my plate of food and raised it to my chin, then proceeded to shovel the remaining pasta directly into my mouth.

“A-Anzu?! What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?!”

“Here! I’ll pay the bill!” I pulled a ten-thousand-yen bill from my wallet and slammed it on the table before dashing out of the café, mouth still filled to the brim with pasta. I couldn’t afford to stay there a minute longer, because I’d finally realized something. Something crucial. Simply waiting around wasn’t ever going to get me anywhere. However, I wasn’t about to give up on Kaoru *or* my manga aspirations. I couldn’t possibly pick between the two. I’d just have to find a way to claim them both.

I would take on the Urashima Tunnel. If I didn’t find Kaoru there, I’d search the whole wide world if I had to. And like Koharu said, I would keep drawing manga while I looked for him. So long as I drew breath, nothing could stop me from drawing manga if I truly wanted it badly enough.

Yes, I knew this greedy decision very well could give me nothing but heartbreak. A hunter who chases two rabbits at once catches none, as they said. But if you felt you had no choice but to go after both rabbits, there was simply no other option—you had to learn to multitask. Perhaps more importantly, you sure as hell weren’t going to catch anything by standing still and hesitating. It would be a cold day in hell before I let *that* happen!

Every fiber of my being was telling me the same exact thing:

Run. Chase after him as fast as you possibly can.

I felt a rush of hot blood swirling around in my head, and a jumbled mess of memories flashed before my eyes like slides from an overhead projector. The day I transferred to Kozaki High. The day I got in a fistfight with that senior thug. The first time I ever followed Kaoru down the train tracks. The day Koharu and I settled our differences. The day Kaoru and I first held hands inside the tunnel. The night we all went to the festival together. The day he up and vanished without a word. Every moment I’d spent with him during that fleeting, still-unending summer propelled me

forward, pushing my legs as fast as they could go as I kicked myself for having ever waited so long.

Are you listening, Tono-kun? Because I'm on my way, and I'm going to find you.

I'll run as fast as I can. I'll track you down to the ends of the earth if I have to.

So please, promise me you'll stay safe until I get there. I'm coming.

It had been five long years since Kaoru entered the Urashima Tunnel.

It was finally time to run in there and take back what was mine.

***

Hanashiro… Hanashiro…!

Over and over again, I called her name as I ran through the tunnel, screaming it in my head even after my throat was too hoarse to make a sound. My entire body was on fire. I felt blood coursing through each individual finger. My heart called on every last cell in my body, pounding harder and harder to spur them into action.

Hanashiro… Hanashiro…!

I barreled into a sharp turn around the next corner, pushing the grip on the soles of my shoes to the absolute limit. I refused to slow down for an instant. The air whooshed like a wind front past my eardrums as I made this intense change in momentum, then pushed through that wall and proceeded at top speed down the next passage.

Hanashiro… Hanashiro…!

Rationally speaking, my muscles should have long since given out, yet they continued to confer their blessings, urging me incessantly ever faster, ever onward.

Hanashiro… You must be so much older and more mature by now. Do you still remember that fateful summer we spent together in high school? Y'know, it's funny, to think back on how awkward our first interaction was. I said something really inconsiderate that any person but you would have been offended by. Yet for whatever reason, it just so happened to pique your interest so much that you followed me all the way into the Urashima Tunnel, where we had our first real exchange. From that point on, we were partners who shared an exciting secret. And over the course of our investigation, I got to know you pretty damn well. You had so many of the things I'd always wanted—so many of the things I lacked. You told me once that you really looked up to me, but from my perspective, I've always been the one looking up to you. You gave off a radiant glow like no one I'd ever known. With your intelligent grace, your brutal honesty, and all your adorable little quirks, you brought a splash of vibrant color to my dreary, monochrome world for the first time in forever.

That's why I could never forget you. Even if you've moved on with your life and forgotten about me, I'll never, ever forget you or those days we spent running like the wind beneath the hot summer sun. You were still only seventeen then, so it probably feels a world away by now, but for me it's all still crystal clear. I'll always remember those days and keep our memories close to—

All of a sudden, I felt a crunching in my legs as they gave out. Apparently, I'd finally hit my limit, and I fell—right at the top of a steep downward incline. I had to brace myself for impact.

I couldn't. There was no time.

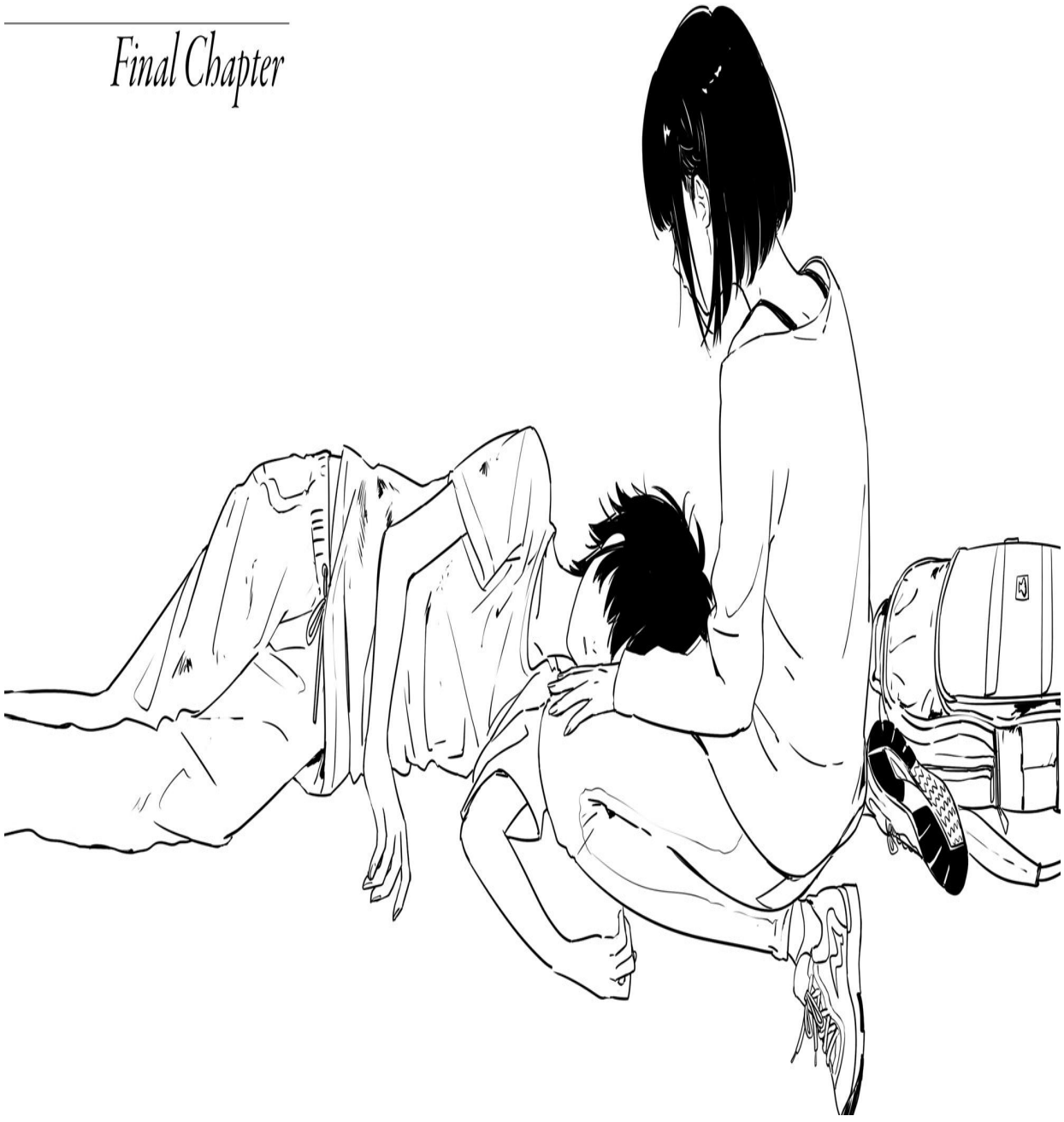
"Aw, shi—"

Before I could raise my arms high enough to protect my face, they took the brunt of the impact with the ground, and a searing pain shot through my wrists. Yet that alone wasn't nearly enough to stop the momentum, and I did a full rotation in midair before crashing hard on my back. The fall knocked every last breath of wind from my lungs, and all I could do was let out a pathetic, breathy cough. Even still, I kept rolling downward, my battered body crashing repeatedly against—

I felt a snap in my brain, as at last the cord was cut, and my mind finally let go.

OceanofPDF.com

Final Chapter



OceanofPDF.com

Final Chapter

I WAS FLOATING, set adrift into a deep and fathomless pool of darkness. I was hard and heavy, as though I'd been buried alive in a coffin full of liquid cement. My whole body lay rigid, suspended in space, with only my consciousness swirling languidly around it. I couldn't cry out for help, or turn my head, or lift a single finger. All I could feel was a creeping cold slowly slithering up my legs. I was afraid. I was confused. My mind tried desperately to wriggle free from its clutches. I screamed within, though it made no sound.

Then I saw it: a tiny pinprick of light piercing the darkness. Suddenly, I regained some small amount of control over my body. I reached for the light with heavy limbs, trying my hardest to claw through the darkness. At first, it was like treading water, paddling hopelessly in the middle of an open ocean with no chance of making it to shore. Eventually, the light began to grow brighter and brighter, and I could just make out the silhouette of a person standing directly in front of it. It looked like a woman, but the light behind her was too blinding to make out her face. The closer I got, though, the more defined her contours became.

"__"

She was saying something, but I couldn't quite make it out from this distance. It sounded like a droning hum. Yet for whatever reason, it soothed my ears, like the voice of an old friend I hadn't seen in years and missed more than the world could ever know. I kept swimming through the liquid darkness, slowly but surely closing the distance between myself and this shadowy figure. When I was finally within arm's length, I reached for her.

"—ono—Tono-kun—"

I heard a voice.

"Tono-kun… Tono-kun…"

It was calling my name. Over and over, like a desperate, tearful plea.

“Tono-kun!”

A water droplet plinked onto my cheek, and I opened my eyes. A woman was looking down at me with tears on her face. She was so close that I couldn’t help but squirm in surprise. However, she had apparently rested my head on her lap. She held one of my hands clasped in both of hers and rubbed it gently against her cheek.

She looked a lot like Anzu, only her hair was much shorter, and she looked quite a bit older than the girl I remembered. If you’d told me she was Anzu’s older sister or something, however, I would have believed you without batting an eye. Why was she crying? What was she doing here in the first place? As far as I could remember, I was still deep inside the Urashima Tunnel.

“Tono-kun… Are you okay? Do you recognize me? It’s me, Hanashiro, Anzu Hanashiro…”

Anzu Hanashiro… *Hanashiro?!*

“Wh-what are you doing here?!” I shouted, sitting up in a fluster. This sudden motion gave me a throbbing headache, and I clutched my forehead in a vain attempt to quell the migraine. When I did this, little flakes of dried blood fluttered from the tips of my bangs. Startled, the woman immediately let go of my hand and grabbed my shoulders to gently prop me up.

“No, don’t! You really shouldn’t move around too much yet. You’re in pretty bad shape…”

“O-okay…”

Anzu helped me sit so that we were directly across from each other on the ground. I stared at her, closely examining her facial features, as she looked me over in turn, clearly concerned about my current state of health.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Does your head hurt? You don’t feel sick or anything?”

“Yeah… I think I hit my head a little too hard. I’m not bleeding anymore, it doesn’t look like, and I don’t feel nauseous or anything… Pretty sure I’ll be all right…”

“You’re sure? Oh, thank goodness…” Anzu placed her hand on her chest as she let out a sigh of deep relief.

I, meanwhile, was still extremely confused. Part of me was convinced I had to be dreaming. “So you’re…really Hanashiro, huh? Then what are you doing here?”

“What am I *doing* here?! Isn’t it obvious?!”

Anzu’s eyes shot wide open, and she raised a clenched fist to shoulder level. She held it shakily aloft for a good few seconds, as though she wasn’t sure where to punch me, before ultimately slamming it flaccidly into my chest. It didn’t hurt, but there was a weight to it that confirmed once and for all that this was more than just a dream. Then, before I knew it, she threw her arms around my neck, wrapping me tight in her embrace. Her damp, silky hair against my cheek. The scent of perspiration tickling my nose.

“I’m here to bring you back because you were taking too long, you moron!” she yelled. Her face was so close to mine that it made my eardrum ring. I didn’t mind one bit.

“What? But I thought for sure you chose to pursue being a manga artist…”

“I did! And I am one!”

“Th-then why the hell are you—”

“Because I finished already! I wrote a whole damn series, and it’s out in paperback and everything! I didn’t rush the conclusion either! I tied up every loose end! But even then, you still hadn’t come out! So I got sick and tired of waiting, and now I’m here to drag your sorry butt back with me! Is that so wrong?!”

I was stunned. Utterly at a loss for words. Not only had Anzu’s story been picked up for serialization, but she’d finished the whole thing, and it was even out in trade paperbacks? She’d accomplished all that while I was running around in the tunnel for just a day or two? *Holy crap.* I honestly couldn’t believe my ears. These were things the average person never

accomplished in their entire lifetime. Then to top it all off, she'd cast everything aside to come chasing after me into the tunnel, all by herself…

"And another thing!" Anzu tightened her stranglehold on my neck. "Why would you ever write that you don't expect me to wait for you?! I can't believe you! We were supposed to be a team, remember?! How could you just leave me behind, all alone?! Was it really so wrong that I got cold feet about that first editing offer?! Is that why you abandoned me?! Is that why you wouldn't let me come with you?!"

"No, it's nothing like that…"

"Waaah! I'm sorry, okay?! Please don't hate me! I don't wanna be alone anymore! Waaaah!"

With her head over my right shoulder, her tears soaked through the fabric of my shirt. She dug her nails so deep into my back, I actually thought she might draw blood. All I could do to make it up to her was gently run my fingers through her hair.

"I'm sorry… I know I put you through an awful lot. You didn't deserve that…"

"Yeah, and if you think I'm gonna let you off easy, you're *dead wrong*!" she said, still sniffling uncontrollably. "I swear, if you *ever* run off on me again…!"

"I know, I know… But don't worry. I'll never leave you behind again. From now on, we're gonna go the distance together."

"…You promise?"

I took Anzu by the shoulders and pulled her head away from my shoulder so I could look her in the eye. Her face was drenched with tears, sweat, and snot. Even so, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I took a deep breath, then brought my face close to hers and took her lips in mine. I went in so fast that our teeth knocked awkwardly together, but she didn't seem to mind, so I decided to lean into it. It lasted all of five seconds —and cost us another several hours—but it was worth every minute. Finally, I pulled my face away. I'd never kissed anyone before; the slight

taste of salt lingered for a good while on my lips. I stood and extended a hand to Anzu, who was still in a bit of a daze after that.

"Come on, partner. Let's go home."

Forty-seven hours, fifty-six minutes. That was the total amount of time I'd spent inside the Urashima Tunnel. When converted to real world time, that came out to…

Thirteen years and forty-five days.

My body was still seventeen, but from a legal standpoint, I was a thirty-year-old man. Anzu, meanwhile, had waited five whole years before entering the tunnel to come after me, and thus was a full-grown, twenty-two-year-old woman.

When we finally did emerge from the Urashima Tunnel, we were greeted by the most beautiful September sunset you could ever imagine. Even when we made it to the main road, I really didn't feel at all like I'd been gone for thirteen years. Kozaki was every bit the sleepy little seaside community it had always been, and even Kozaki High—which I'd always figured would be demolished and consolidated into one of the bigger nearby high schools before long—still stood tall and proud over the town. Probably the most surprising thing was the newfangled types of phones I saw people playing with on the train. They were all tip-tapping around on the screens with their bare hands, and I had to wonder how the glass didn't constantly get smudged with fingerprints.

Since I was still in pretty bad shape from running around and getting all beat up in the tunnel, we stepped into a random clothing store along the way to get me a fresh outfit, then checked into a cheap business hotel in the city. We took turns using the shower of our unassuming twin room, then sat on our beds and talked about anything and everything that had happened since we saw each other last. I told her about the crazy things I had seen in the Urashima Tunnel and how I really had managed to reunite with my little sister, if only for a little while. She told me about her new life and what it was like being a serialized manga creator. We spoke animatedly for hours on end and quickly lost track of the time. Before we knew it, it was well

past midnight. Eventually, we got to the subject of where exactly we saw ourselves going from here.

“I’m going to keep writing manga,” Anzu assertively declared. “I’ll rent a condo or something and pour everything I can into making my big comeback. I figure I’ve got enough money left to keep myself fed for another two years or so while I come up with something, and it’s really the only thing I’m good at, so…yeah.”

“Hey, sounds good to me. Not that I’d have any right to tell you otherwise.”

“What about you, Tono-kun? What are you going to do now?”

I floundered at this, mainly because I had literally no plan of action. I honestly hadn’t given much thought to what might happen after I left the Urashima Tunnel. I had been too preoccupied with seeing Karen again, so I’d kind of just shrugged it off and told myself I could surely find *some* way to make a living if only I worked hard enough. Anzu putting my carelessness under a microscope made me feel like the most pathetic moron alive. Even so, I had no intention of lying to her.

“Sorry, I really haven’t given it much thought,” I answered honestly. “I know I’m gonna have to find a job of some sort, obviously.”

Anzu shot me a concerned look, then started rubbing her chin between her fingers. “Mmm… But you’re supposed to be thirty, as far as the government is concerned, right? I mean, the same can be said for me, obviously, but I feel like it’ll be pretty tough to find stable employment with a thirteen-year gap on your record, especially when you didn’t get your high school diploma.”

She was extremely correct. So correct, in fact, that my heart sank to the pit of my stomach. Just as I opened my mouth to assure her I’d find a way regardless, she cut me off in a loud and declarative voice. “Speaking of which, I’ve been thinking about moving to Tokyo.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yes. It’s just more convenient for someone in my industry when you can be there in person for things. I’ve also been thinking of hiring an

assistant."

"Oh? What kind of assistant?"

"Ideally, someone who could help me draw to lighten my load. Adding half-tone shading, filling in all-black areas, maybe drawing some simple backgrounds if possible. That sort of thing."

…I honestly wasn't sure I was capable of doing even that much. I'd only taken two or three semesters of art class, and I really didn't have an artistic bone in my body. I wondered how "simple" these backgrounds she envisioned were supposed to be. If it were just, like, sandy beaches or scorched-black plains or something, maybe I could manage, but… No, there was no way. As I mulled over what I might actually be capable of, Anzu giggled and let herself fall backward onto the bed.

"On the other hand, it might be more useful to have an emotional support person who could help me out around the house. Someone who could give me pep talks or feedback when I'm feeling down or in a creative rut, and be my live-in assistant twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. You wouldn't happen to know anyone who might fit the bill, would you?"

Oh, so that's your game, eh? Finally reading between the lines, I got up and sat right next to Anzu on the other bed, lifting her off the mattress with both arms.

"Well, if you think I'm a qualified candidate, I'd be more than happy to help out."

"…You sure you don't mind being with an aging twenty-two-year-old like me? I mean, I've practically got one foot in the grave," she joked.

"You kidding? I've always had a thing for older women."

"Wait, really?"

"Nah. Just you."

"Ah ha ha… God, you're so full of it. Always have been."

"Oh, you think so, huh?"

"Why, yes. I do, actually."

The conversation died off, and for a good, long moment, we simply stared deep into each other's eyes. Just when I thought the mood might be right, she grabbed a pillow and swung it hard into my face. I fell backward, and she proceeded to pounce on me and playfully smother me with it.

"Ha ha ha! I'm sorry, I can't! That was so cringey, I'm dying!"

"Oh, *now* you've done it!"

I grabbed the other pillow and threw it at her in retaliation—but she snatched it right out of the air and came back for more, pummeling me relentlessly with pillows in both hands. I was laughing so hard, it was all I could do to shield my face from the assault. Anzu and I went on fooling around until our sides were as sore as our bodies had already been, then crashed into bed together, thoroughly exhausted after what had probably been the single longest day in history.

Several days after we emerged from the Urashima Tunnel, it was finally starting to feel like we were getting into the swing of things. After filing some short-form paperwork, we were officially approved to lease a unit in a pretty nice condominium in the Tokyo suburbs. We were still living in Kozaki for the time being, but we'd been assigned a room number and planned to move the next day.

Anzu read new manga every day and brainstormed so she could start working toward her big comeback. It had been eight years since her last series concluded, so she really had to catch up with the times and modern trends if she wanted to compete with the big names in the industry. Meanwhile, I'd read all the way through her previous work, which I'd been eagerly looking forward to the entire time I was in the tunnel. When she first handed me the physical copy of Volume 1, I couldn't believe I was actually holding it in my hands—though once I got to reading, it was the story itself that I found truly unbelievable.

Anzu's artistic and storytelling abilities had grown light years beyond that first amateur manga she'd let me read in her old bedroom. Though it seemed there were some things that hadn't changed, because when I gave

her my rave review, she went tomato-red from ear to ear, just like she had in high school.

Speaking of high school, we met up with Koharu and Shohei the day before, after Anzu and I had invited them out for lunch. They were both grown adults by now, obviously, and quite a bit older than Anzu. When they first walked in and saw me, unchanged from the day they last laid eyes on me, Shohei looked like he'd seen a ghost while Koharu started crying, then ran up and punched me in the shoulder. She seemed genuinely a little pissed as she demanded to know where the hell I'd been all this time, and I explained things as honestly and clearly as I could. When I finally finished, Shohei was the first to speak up.

"Y'know, as much as I'd like to call you on it and say you must've been having some crazy fever dream or something…just looking at you guys, it's pretty hard to deny that *something* out of this world must've happened to you. But hey, you're back now, right? That's all that really matters."

"God, do you guys have any idea how worried I was?!" Koharu cut in. "I mean, first *you* up and vanish on us without a word, and then I lose Anzu too?! Ugh… But yes, I'm very glad you're both with us now…"

After that, the four of us proceeded to wax nostalgic about our high school days and get caught up with what was going on in each of our lives, all while slowly picking away at serving after serving of okonomiyaki. Shohei and Koharu were both officially in their thirties, and they were living out respectable lives with respectable careers. Shohei worked for a real estate firm in town, while Koharu was an elementary school teacher. Of course, I already knew these things from my discussions with Anzu, but I couldn't conceal my surprise upon hearing it straight from the source, especially when it came to Koharu. There really was no telling how a person might turn out.

"Y'know, it seems like you've changed a bit, man," Shohei said, pulling me aside as Anzu and Koharu were busy chatting it up about something or other. "I mean, not in the looks department, obviously… But I feel like you've definitely got some 'big man on campus' energy. Like

you’re gonna do you, and you don’t give a damn what anyone else might think.”

“Yeah, well… I’ve kinda been through a lot these past few days, ha ha…”

“God, I’d love to see Kawasaki try to extort your lunch money *now*. Bet you’d just tell her to go screw herself and walk away.”

“Hey! He’s not the only one who’s matured here, you know!” Koharu butted in, and we all started laughing.

“Hey, at least you’ve finally found purpose in your life, my man,” Shohei went on. “Hell, plenty of folks *our* age still have trouble with that. So don’t ever lose sight of it, all right? Keep that backbone straight, you hear me?”

“Thanks, man… I definitely will. But hell, you sure pay close attention to me, you know that? You’d make a great therapist.”

“Yeah, well. Analyzing people’s psychologies is kind of a hobby of mine. You knew that though, didn’t you?”

I couldn’t help but smile at this exchange. It really was a blast from the past.

“Right. How could I ever forget?”

When we finally ran out of things to talk about, Shohei mentioned offhand that he’d like to see this so-called Urashima Tunnel for himself. So, as soon as we finished our meals, we all headed there to take a look.

However, the tunnel was gone. All that stood in its place was a flat wall of rock. Almost like it had never been there at all.

“Okay, you guys. Come on, what gives?” Shohei demanded impatiently.

I could only really shrug my shoulders. “…Who knows? Maybe it really was a fever dream after all.”

All four of us couldn’t help but feel like we’d been bamboozled.

After saying our goodbyes to Shohei and Koharu, Anzu and I set off toward our next destination. We hopped off the train and headed down the road that ran alongside the train tracks. After passing by the closed-down rice dealer and the old fire station—its doors still shuttered to this day—we arrived at our destination.

It was my house, or rather, the house I used to call my home. We walked right past the big No Trespassing sign and up to the front door. The locks hadn't been changed, thankfully, so I was still able to let myself inside. I'd heard from Shohei that my father had long since moved away from Kozaki but had been unable to find a buyer for our old house, so now it just stood there, slowly withering away. It didn't surprise me that he'd been unable to sell the place; it was an old wooden house that would need a lot of renovations. I wouldn't have been shocked to see it demolished by the next time I came back to look at it.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Anzu said politely as she walked in the front door behind me. Obviously, there was no one living within who might respond or care. It was still broad daylight outside, yet the house's interior was surprisingly dark due to the shutters on the windows and screen doors. We walked over creaky floorboards down the hall as the rich smell of dusty hardwood filled our lungs. We made our way up the stairs, taking care not to get caught in any of the spider webs hanging from the ceiling, and arrived at my bedroom door. I reached out and opened it.

"…Nothing left, huh?" Anzu muttered to herself.

The place had indeed been stripped clean of all its personal effects, though I had to admit, it did feel surprisingly roomy without my bed and writing desk taking up so much space. Anzu, however, quickly slumped her shoulders in defeat. It had been her idea to come here in the first place; she wanted to see if there were any childhood mementos that we might be able to salvage. I assumed she had been hoping to at least find an old photo album or something.

"Well, you can't say I didn't warn you in advance. Had a feeling my dad would've cleaned the place out."

"Yeah, but you'd think there'd be *something* left."

“So what now? You wanna check the other rooms too, just in case?”

Anzu shook her head. “No, I’ll admit defeat. If they were this thorough in clearing out your room, I highly doubt we’ll find anything interesting in any of the others, and I’d feel weird rummaging through stuff that isn’t even yours… Let’s go home.”

I nodded, and we headed back down the stairs. Just as I got done putting my shoes on in the entryway, I remembered something. Something important.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. There is something we should grab before we go.”

“What’s that?”

“C’mere. I’ll show ya.”

We headed out the front door and circled around to the backyard. I quickly found the familiar gap in the crawlspace and reached my hand inside. My fingers touched something cold and metallic. *Thank God, it’s still here.* I pulled it out and wiped the dust from the lid of the old rectangular tin.

Anzu looked at this box of treasures in wonder, as if she could already tell how valuable it was to me. “What’s that?”

“It’s where I keep every memento I still have of my little sister.”

Upon hearing this, Anzu’s face went pale for a split second, but she quickly collected herself. “Oh, wow…” she whispered softly, a tone of reverence in her voice.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve got a few old photos of me in here too. Though I only really set aside the ones that were of me and Karen together, obviously.”

I lifted the lid off the tin and was greeted by the sight of the heel straps of Karen’s bright red sandals. On top of them, however, there lay an envelope, one that I’d never seen before.

“Huh? What’s this?”

It was a plain old manila envelope with nothing written on it whatsoever. I had no recollection of ever putting anything like it in there. Tilting my head with curiosity, I opened it and peeked inside. It contained only a single sheet of folded notebook paper. I pulled it out and opened it. The only things written on it were an address and phone number I didn't recognize…and then at the very bottom of the page, my father's name.

"Wait…"

I could only assume that this was my father's new address and phone number. Had he really known about my treasure box all this time? Or maybe he'd found it after I'd left for the Urashima Tunnel. Either way, he'd somehow known about this old metal tin and deliberately chosen not to throw it away, opting instead to leave his new contact information inside in case I should ever come back to retrieve it. Of that much, I could be certain. A twinge ran through my chest.

Goddammit. I thought I was supposed to be over this crap…

"Is that…your father's address?" Anzu asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yeah… Looks like it."

"What are you gonna do with it?"

"…Let's bring it home with us. You never know… Maybe there'll come a time when I'm ready to face him again."

I caught myself thinking that if that ever came to pass, it would be nice if I could talk amicably with him again, just like old times. I bit my lip with chagrin at the realization that even after all this time, somewhere deep down, I still held hope for a decent relationship with him. Then all of a sudden, Anzu grasped me by the arm.

"If it's too much for you alone, you know I'd always go with you, right?" she offered, flashing me that perfect, fearless smile of hers.

"Yeah. I'd like that," I said, smiling right back.

With the treasure box tucked under one arm and Anzu on the other, I left the old, ramshackle house behind. A gust of wind shook the power lines overhead, and an icy chill crept up the back of my neck. As I shivered from

the cold, I realized for the first time that I hadn’t heard any cicadas chirping in a good while. It seemed that after thirteen years of summer, Anzu and I were finally ready to greet the fall—together. I never thought I’d be sad to see it go, but I couldn’t be too upset, because I knew another unforgettable summer was waiting just around the bend.

OceanofPDF.com

Afterword

I'VE ALWAYS WANTED to write a good, solid novel.

Not necessarily one that will stick with people throughout their entire lives, or change their entire worldview, or that people will still be talking about in literature classes two hundred years from now, mind you. Just a plain old compelling narrative, with a magnetic world and characters that can draw readers in and make them forget all their real-world woes, regrets, jealousies, or whatever else might be irritating them at that particular moment. A real page-turner that, by the time people reach the ending, will make them look up at the clock and be amazed by how many hours flew by without them even noticing. Almost like the book itself has the capacity to slow the flow of time for the reader, even as the outside world continues speeding on by. Kind of like the Urashima effect. That's one thing that all the best novels have in common, if you ask me.

I've spent many a night mulling endlessly over thoughts like this, like a rambling drunkard who can't hold his liquor nearly as well as he thinks he can. But if this, my very first ever novel, managed to pull you in like I've just described, I think that would be the greatest reward that I, as an author, could ever ask for.

Not to imply that I could ever have done this alone, however.

To my editor, Hamada-sensei: Thank you for all of the laser-focused advice you gave me back when I didn't know the first thing about being a professional writer. I can't tell you how grateful I am to have an editor who's as passionate about my story as I am.

To the extremely talented KUKKA-sensei, who provided the beautiful art for this book: When I first laid eyes upon your jaw-dropping cover illustration, I remember I froze in place and thought to myself, "Wow. Now I *really* need to make a story that lives up to this artwork." It was so stunning, it legitimately took my breath away.

To the guest examiner on the judges' panel, Asai Labo-sensei: Your written notes about my original manuscript were so in-depth, I felt like they gave me my first proper glimpse into the world of being a professional author. I will endeavor to continue writing novels in a way that will not bring shame to your glowing endorsement on the cover of this book.

To my dear older sister: Thank you for always lending me an ear whenever I needed advice or a sanity check. You were my first fan and my first critic long before I ever submitted any writing to anyone else, and it was much appreciated… I pray you'll always remain in sound health and mind for the rest of your days.

And to my past self, who always dreamed of being an author someday: All those long days you spent writing, pouring your heart and soul onto the page as impatience and regret over your life choices slowly crept up on you? They finally paid off here, in this book. Sure, you had to take a fair few detours and make a whole lot of mistakes to get here, but just look—it wasn't all for nothing, now was it? Thanks for never giving up on your dreams.

Finally, I'd like to thank all the other people who had a hand in bringing this book to life aside from those few whose names I've written above. I'm sorry I don't have all the space in the world to thank each and every one of you. Please know that you'll forever have my undying gratitude for your equally important contributions.

On that note, dear reader, I leave you. Until we meet again.

MEI HACHIMOKU

2019

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mei Hachimoku

Born in 1994. Kansai resident. Wandering through life with a whole lot of purpose but absolutely zero sense of direction. No clue where the hell I’m going anymore, or where I might end up. Just gotta focus on keeping the lights on for now, I guess.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

KUKKA

Born in 1995. Goto Islands native. Huge fan of all types of rodents, but hamsters most of all. Matcha-flavored desserts are my lifeblood.

OceanofPDF.com

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

OceanofPDF.com